SOUL VIBRATION
Via Lactea Ltd.
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Via Lactea

Soul Vibration Vol.1

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SYNOPSIS

Talented Bassist x Indie Singer-Songwriter,
Idol x Fanboy,
Rock Star x Assistant,
Straight x Straight
From admiration to love.

This novel describes the daily lives of a chart-topping rock band, LOTUS, told from the perspective of the **bassist's** personal assistant.

Independent singer-songwriter Chi Nan had to give up on his music dream after finding out about his **incurable** hearing defect. At the depths of **his despair**, the bassist of his favorite band, LOTUS, bought the rights to all his songs and made him his personal assistant.

"Even if I become completely deaf, I can't break free from myself. Even if half of me **grows** old, the other half will always remain within **the dream named Rock and roll, the dream named Teenage Dream, named Salinger.**"

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TRACK 01

FEW knew that the LOTUS bassist Lin Sai, commonly known as Salinger, was good on the guitar too. He even taught their drummer, Alan, his craft. The man was a multi-instrumentalist master, and second only to their vocalist Ji Shi in popularity.

"You ever wonder why you're popular?" Fei-*jie*[1], the host of "*Yi Hu Wan Ying*[2]," had asked him once on the talk show. "Do you think fans like you for your good looks, or because you're cool and different?"

He had replied, "They like me 'cause I'm tall, I guess."

Then, Fei-*jie* had led the audience in a round of applause. "Talk show hosts love rock stars. You guys just won't stick to the script!"

Standing at 6'1", Salinger probably *did* believe at the time that he stood out from the crowd simply because of his height. But it's hard to say if there had been any deliberate antagonism, because he *was* that kid in school who wouldn't answer questions properly. No one knew if he'd ever seriously considered how attractive he was.

All the band members had nicknames; these were given to you, and you didn't get to just shake them off. Take Ji Shi, for example—his nickname was "Himbo." The first time I heard it was at practice. Still absorbed in his own voice, the singer didn't respond when Salinger called him by his actual name. The bassist had to shout "Himbo!" before Ji Shi stopped with a "Huh?"

"You're out of tune," Salinger pointed out.

"No, I'm not," Ji Shi snapped.

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not."

"If I say you're out of tune, you're out of tune."

There's an anecdote related to this. LOTUS once went on a reality show where they were asked to play a pitch game. The host would tap the glass with a spoon, then tell the singer to remember the pitch and repeat the note. The goal was to make the glass vibrate enough that a ping-pong ball would bounce out of it. The game could only have been described as frustrating to LOTUS. It'd been played by many singers before, and most could at least make the ball tremble a little—but Ji Shi couldn't move the ball one bit, even after a whole lot of shaking and shivering. Then, for whatever reason, he began to hiccup. Alan, the drummer, exclaimed from his seat below that Ji Shi ate too much—*"It affects his performance, you know?"* To that, the leader Li Xiang could only give an awkward smile.

The host had asked in jest, "Can we get a volunteer who hasn't overeaten?"

Stone-*ge*[3] had just about had enough, and was about to roll up his sleeves and go up himself when Salinger stopped him.

"Sure."

The audience was thrilled. Even the host called it a miracle—*Salinger, who's been spacing out this whole time, finally remembered he was part of the band!* The room burst into laughter.

Salinger had but one request—to have Ji Shi stand next to him.

Ji Shi asked, "*Hic*—why do you want me to—*hic*—stand—*hic*—next to you?"

"To stop your hiccups."

The host held up a spoon and told Salinger, "If the ping-pong ball doesn't move, you have to tell us your real name."

LOTUS had always been mysterious. None of the band members' family backgrounds had ever been revealed, but people at least knew the members' real names—except for Salinger's, which had been kept secret from outsiders and apparently even the paparazzi.

Salinger didn't seem to hear the excited cries from the audience. He just said, "Go ahead."

The host carefully clinked the glass and then asked if he wanted to hear it again. Salinger picked up the mic and belted. The moment his voice broke out, the glass started shaking violently on the table before exploding with a bang. Ji Shi crouched in fear. If it weren't for Salinger's arm in the way, he would have been showered in broken glass pieces. The ping-pong ball ended up bouncing off Ji Shi's head, and his hiccups stopped instantly.

Ji Shi later admitted there were two things he could never learn from Salinger: one being his musicianship, the other being the fact that he could fool people into thinking he was badass when silent. He could keep his cool even when he spoke.

Stone-*ge* had thrown a clip at Ji Shi. He corrected, "Those are three things!"

After band practice, Ji Shi kept reminding me that I needed to keep the nickname "Himbo" to myself and never use it in public. Then, the vocalist revealed the others' nicknames. The drummer Alan was "Crybaby" because he always teared up when they got to the emotional parts of the songs. Once, he'd even passed out onstage. The leader Li Xiang was the only one in the band who hadn't been nicknamed, but because of his poor communication with his assistant, Julie-*jie*, he was often teased by Stone-*ge* and the others, "There stands a Julie between reality and Li Xiang[4]." As for Stone-*ge*, I heard he gave himself the stage name when he started playing in high school. It was originally meant to be "Stone[5]," as in the English word, but it sounded like "Shi-tone" in his shoddy pronunciation. The latter caught on. The word was meant to inspire him to be tough as a rock, but Ji Shi said most people called him that just because he was hard to please.

The name "Salinger" seemed to have been around for a while. Though the band members knew him by his real name, they still privately called him Handsome Sai.

He was handsome, alright. Handsome in appearance, and even more so in action!

No one would dispute the fact that Ji Shi was the face of the band. The vocalist was the heartthrob of every teenage girl's fantasy. But as fans soon discovered, the unassuming bassist upstage was just as gorgeous.

6'1", dreamy, quiet, good with his hands (on instruments, of course), as silent onstage as a striking ghost. He could race from the paparazzi fast enough on his motorcycle to leave them speechless. Elusive as he was, he'd still been photographed once in a discreet baseball cap and baseball jacket, helping a blind musician tune an acoustic guitar in a music store.

When he played it cool, he was the rock star who went up against sharp-tongued hosts and the omnipresent paparazzi, but when he didn't, he was the boy next door helping new students find their way on campus, and helping grannies feed the cats in the neighborhood. The reticent but friendly type.

When I first started, I kept calling him *qianbei*[6]. I was still in high school when LOTUS debuted, plus, Salinger was four years older than me. Whether in age, qualifications, or musicianship, he was doubtless my senior—though one of us was a celebrity and the other a mere assistant. There was no real *qianbei-houbei*[7] relationship between us.

At some point, Salinger told me he felt uncomfortable with me calling him that. To tell the truth, my heart sank for a second. Maybe I hadn't thought of myself as his assistant; I was still deluding myself that I was a musician slowly getting to his level.

But then he said, "Call me Salinger, or Lin Sai-*ge*."

My disappointment was replaced by great surprise, as if the mysteries of the universe that everyone chased had suddenly come to me, catching me off-guard. I was overwhelmed by the honor.

"Is Lin Sai your real name?" I asked.

"So common it sounds made up, huh?"

I tried to hide my excitement, but soon felt that it was perhaps a bit inappropriate. "Aside from Stone-*ge* and the others, it seems like no one knows your real name."

Salinger took a drag on his cigarette. "What do they need my name for? I'm only telling you so you can do your job."

"What did your assistants use to call you?"

I was curious. Perhaps the two predecessors before me also knew his real name, which would mean I got excited for nothing.

He looked somewhat confused for a second, then recalled, "None of them seemed to have that problem. They just call me *ge*. Can you call me that?"

While I looked at this man, I thought about how much of an icon Salinger was to me. He wasn't one of those superficial celebrities, but a spiritual icon in my world of music and rock. I felt like I couldn't just call him *ge*, so I let out an awkward chuckle and shook my head.

Salinger looked at me. "I'm not used to people not related to me calling me *ge* either, but I didn't know how to correct them."

"Why not just Lin Sai-*ge*?"

Calling him "*ge*" alone felt too intimate. It seemed much more natural to attach his name to it.

"Why bother adding that when they were already calling me *ge*?"

A wisp of white smoke drifted from between his fingers to his somewhat apathetic eyes under his baseball cap. It took me a while before I sort of understood what he meant.

Salinger was direct, sometimes so much so that it could be hurtful, but he was

often quiet. If you didn't talk to him first, he wouldn't talk to you all day unless he felt the need to. While everyone else argued at band meetings and practices, he'd watch from the sidelines, his eyes unfocused, his back arched like a panther. No wonder he often left others with the impression of being standoffish.

But that wasn't really him. You could even say it was all just one big misunderstanding. At his "coolest" moments, he was probably just spacing out, a yawn here and there, rubbing his eyes, trying to light a cigarette but dropping it, swooping down to catch it only to miss it, leaving him with no choice but to squat and pick it up. Even when he embarrassed himself, he looked like a volatile Bad Boy, and particularly boyish (or old man-ish) at that.

This one time, Stone-*ge* and Ji Shi were fighting over the lyrics yet again. Glancing at his watch, Salinger picked up a single drumstick and did a drum lick across the whole set. His extraordinary one-handed performance got everyone to quiet down.

He put his hands on the quivering drumheads. "Are you guys done arguing?"

"You can't put that in the lyrics. It's too erotic…" Stone-*ge* said, indignant.

Ji Shi disagreed. "I think it's great. Love is meant to be loud!"

Alan always stood on Ji Shi's side no matter what, so Ji Shi would get two votes regardless. On the other hand, the leader Li Xiang was with Stone on this. 2:2.

Salinger took the lyrics from Stone's hands, skimmed them, and frowned. "'...Flesh and soul'? What is this? We can't use this. It's not PG. Use the first draft."

Ji Shi was incredulous. He held the lyrics up with both hands. "How is this not PG? Since when are our songs meant for kids?"

"Yeah, how is it not PG?" Alan chimed in. "Of all people, I can't believe this came from a person with as much filth on his mind as you, handsome."

Salinger was already halfway out the door. He paused before saying, "You're right. The world is filthy, and since we're all filth—" The rest of the band shook their heads. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket, resigned. "Fine, you're not. *I'm* filth. All the more reasons to protect the youngsters of today, or else I have fouled my mind in vain."

Dressed in an aviator jacket, Salinger, who was barely twenty-seven at the time, said this like a seasoned World War II veteran. Shouldering the door open, he left the rehearsal studio.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

LOTUS debuted during my second year in high school. The band members were still in their early twenties. The name reflected their wish to "remain unsullied in the mud" like the flower. I didn't have a lot of money when I was in high school, but I bought every single one of their albums. Now five years have come and gone, and LOTUS was still the voice of dreams, youthfulness, and life, as they were when they first started out. They had a mournful and pensive side, but they were never overly indulgent, and no matter how debauched the industry was, they were never tainted by it.

Out of sheer coincidence, my focus was not on the vocalist, Ji Shi—who was the

most popular by far—or the band's main songwriter, Stone. Rather, it was on the other songwriter, Salinger.

Stone wrote catchy songs with infectious lyrics that teenagers loved to sing along to. The youthful dreams and teenage angst that flowed from his pen were carved into school desks and boys' bathrooms everywhere. Somehow Salinger's songs seemed to hit me harder. Every quiet night, I would put their CDs on repeat. Stone brought you fiery suns, resplendent fireworks, and raging fire. But once you're in the realm of Salinger, the world becomes a cold, uninhabited planet with a meandering sort of beauty, with her glowing mountains and glistening rivers and a giant setting sun. His lyrics were deeply ruminative, like verses that bards sang to wandering souls.

Listening to Salinger's songs, even my dreams became bizarre and dazzling. Many a time, I dreamt of a collapsing waterfall. Water crashed onto dark rocks in a slow splash. While many were moved to tears by the youthful passion in Stone's writing, I found cold, sorrowful, yet heartfelt comfort in Salinger's music.

If Stone was the light of LOTUS, Salinger was the shadow. Stone wasn't afraid to rebel, but Salinger brought rumination into their songs. This band could never become too extravagant in its display of passion because they had the strength to ground themselves.

I first met Salinger when I went on a music show in college. At that time, I was also in a band; unfortunately, we didn't carry on. I was feeling lost at the time, and a friend encouraged me to enter a CBC-TV competition called *Super Sound* as a singer-songwriter. Salinger was on the audition panel.

Stone was supposed to be on the panel instead, but he was sick at the time, and the production team had to decide who to replace him with. The sponsors wanted it to be Ji Shi, but he turned it down. To produce a high-quality music program, the production team followed the advice of the program's musical director and finally decided to invite Salinger, which turned out to be a win-win. The sponsors were not disappointed—after all, Salinger wouldn't let them down in terms of popularity.

As Salinger watched the other contestants from the panel, I watched him from offstage. It was hard to tell from his face whether he was going to pass or fail a contestant. Sometimes he would give it some thought after the other judges tried to sway him one way or another, but in the end, he always voted down whomever he felt the need to vote down. It was interesting seeing him think with his chin in his hands. Later I'd learn that Salinger would never hesitate or change his mind once he'd made it up. Maybe he only pretended it was a hard decision out of respect for the other judges.

I was both excited and nervous when it got to my turn. I admired LOTUS; that was beyond doubt. But I'd never once revealed that I didn't want Salinger to think I was being obsequious while onstage. My entry was an original soft rock single, "See You the Day After Tomorrow," which was likely the first original song to appear on this show. I wasn't sure about that decision, but I preferred to sing my own songs on a stage like this. As I finished, to my surprise, all four judges gave me a pass, including Salinger, who kept up his poker face throughout the entire performance.

You could never expect Salinger to be as excited as the other judges and say he was "blown away" by a contestant's performance. I was lucky enough to have him

turn his light on for me. Only then did I exclaim I was a huge LOTUS fan. Xiao Chuan-*laoshi*[8], who sat next to Salinger, popped a question: "So are you a little disappointed that it's Salinger who's here today?"

It was provocative, an ugly trap, and undoubtedly a deliberate attempt to embarrass Salinger. Both of the judges sitting next to them looked a little uncomfortable, because everyone knew Xiao Chuan's protégé had just gotten voted out by Salinger.

"Disappointed? Why? Salinger is great!" the singer Wen Ting asked.

"I'm not saying he's not great," Xiao Chuan-*laoshi* smirked. "But you gotta admit, if we're talking about popularity, Ji Shi is the face of LOTUS; if we're talking music, Stone is the main songwriter."

I picked up the microphone almost without thinking. "It's true that Stone-*ge* is the main songwriter, but my favorite has always been Salinger *qianbei*!"

At the time, I didn't even realize what was wrong with my words. I was just being recalcitrant.

"Sorry, sir, but I happen to like Salinger very much."

Fighting back against an insult to your hero was what any fan would do. But I'd forgotten that this was a competition, and that I was standing there not as Salinger's fan but as a contestant. As soon as I finished speaking, the entire audience gave me a funny look. Xiao Chuan-*laoshi* leaned back in his chair with a scornful look in his eyes.

I realized I'd made a stupid mistake and immediately turned to look at Salinger. It didn't matter what anyone else thought of me at that moment. If Salinger thought I was putting on a show, too…

Xiao Chuan looked sideways at Salinger and teased, "Do you believe that?"

Salinger looked down at my files. "Chi Nan," he called out.

Hearing my name from his mouth all of a sudden made me take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

"I probably wouldn't have believed you if you'd just said that, but I could tell it was true once your music came on," he said to me with perfect calmness, amidst the amazement of the audience. "I like your song. It's like my own music and yet completely different. And by the way, have some faith in your *favorite*."

I didn't know who started it, but one after another, hands started clapping in the auditorium. Perhaps the desire to have a heart-to-heart with your idol was also rooted in the hearts of many people there.

I even felt thankful toward Xiao Chuan-*laoshi*; otherwise, I might not have received any comments from Salinger. How else would I know what he was thinking upon hearing my music?

It was my first time getting up close and personal with Salinger, and this time I was drawn to him not only by his music, but also by his quiet ability to see right through me. I walked off the stage with just one thought on my mind—*I was right to admire him.*

The most you could want out of your hero was probably the ability to look back

years later and still feel that the admiration from your youth had not let you down.

I was a bit disappointed that I didn't make it into the Final Four, but I told myself not to dwell on it too much. After all, not everyone was going to make it to the top.

But I ended up hearing a rumor about the competition from the other contestants.

It turned out the top three positions had already been decided by the time we got to the Final Ten.

"Chi Nan, I'm not trying to tell you what to do, but an indie musician like you shouldn't participate in this kind of competition. You'll just end up as someone else's stepping stone. You're not bad-looking, but your soft boy looks aren't popular anymore. People dig the Korean idol look these days. I think you should just be practical. Take your time writing and pitching songs."

A contestant I met during the competition said this to me very bluntly that day after shooting, when I was at a roadside stall for a late supper. I told him I wasn't soft, but he said, "Your songs aren't, but all that matters in the industry is your visuals. Nobody cares about your music."

I didn't take what he said to heart. Any high school kid could say that. But I believed my talent would not stay hidden as long as I had it.

A few days after the elimination, the program producers told me to shoot a group farewell VCR with the rest of the eliminated contestants. So on the day of the final round, I went to the studio again, spoke a few words to the camera, and left. As I was waiting for the elevator, I saw Xiao Chuan-*laoshi* and his protégé coming my way. The girl got the wild card position by popular vote and advanced to the final round with the other top four. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't envious, but I didn't want to make it awkward, so I went into the stairwell.

However, Xiao Chuan did not enter the elevator with the girl. Instead, he stood there talking to her in the hallway, telling her not to worry about Salinger. The panel would not vote in the final round. The most Salinger could do was to comment on her performance, which he wouldn't do anyway—because how could someone who didn't know how to say the right things be allowed to freaking comment on a contestant that was already slated to win? Even if he did, whatever he said would be cut out of the show when it aired!

The girl said she was still afraid of him.

"What's there to be afraid of? If he's that powerful, his musician *fan* wouldn't have been eliminated."

Then the voices faded away. I guess they went into the elevator. I wasn't much of an eavesdropper, but I couldn't help it when someone mentioned Salinger.

The studio downstairs was entering the countdown before filming. The doors at the back of the studio opened and closed, and staff were rushing from room to room. Every now and then, rumbling background music and hosts' mic tests could be heard.

The rebel in me came back with a vengeance. If I was still in the game, I probably couldn't have stopped myself from arguing against the guy right then and there. I honestly didn't expect Xiao Chuan to see Salinger this way. As a musician, was this how he viewed his peers and this competition? It was ridiculous. Why had

I called this guy "*laoshi*" in the first place? It even tainted all those songs of his that I used to listen to.

"There you are."

I was just mocking myself when a door was pushed open. I turned to see Salinger in a black jacket and a black baseball cap. He was dressed so casually, completely different from when he was shooting, that I almost didn't recognize him at first glance. When I did, I slowly stood up.

"*Qianbei*."

"I'm leaving after this episode. I've been looking for you."

I was beyond flattered, standing up straighter almost immediately. "What did *qianbei* want to see me about?"

Someone passed by outside. Salinger lowered his cap and said, "Nothing. I just came to tell you that I knew you wouldn't make it to the final, but I also know you are the most talented of them all."

I must have dropped my jaw right then. More than that, I became ashamed of my self-pity from before. So what if I won the competition? It would have been no match for what I had just heard from my idol.

I was so excited I forgot to speak, and he apparently wasn't very good at speaking either. I started to feel bad about the awkward silence hanging in the stairwell. He appeared to have noticed that and asked, "Did you bring your sheet music?"

I nodded and took it out of my backpack. Salinger picked one out and said, "I like this one the most, but the arrangement is a little bit too showy."

He turned to pull a pen out of the side pocket of my backpack and wrote on the sheets.

"Cut all this unnecessary padding. You have a very distinctive voice. If you're singing it yourself, you can cut even more of the arrangement in some places. Try editing it again like that and pitch it."

The way he got straight to the point, he must have already figured out how to improve the song before we even spoke. He then recommended a list of producers and singers who were interested in new talents and warned me against people who should not be contacted, saying they were all scumbags. It was so straightforward I didn't even know what to say.

I asked, "Can I pitch it to you guys?"

Salinger answered, "We're an original band. There's no way we'd use your songs, but you can try pitching it to our label."

That I knew already, but the moment you saw his face, you'd just lose your head and start spewing nonsense.

With that, he left. The whole exchange lasted no more than ten minutes. As a fan, I had a ton of things I wanted to say to him. Things like, *I've been your fan for years*, *please take care of yourself*, *please write more songs*, and *you should be careful because Xiao Chuan doesn't like you*.

But Salinger had come to me and spoken to me directly about how I could

improve my song, the people I should contact and the people I shouldn't. What I wanted to say would have been a waste of time for him.

In the end, I just said thank you. I thought, since he told me to have faith in him, he wouldn't underestimate the weight of that "thank you."

TRACK 02

PEOPLE like me who arrived in the big city alone, wanting to make something of ourselves, came and went. Few managed to achieve their dreams. Even those who succeeded must have lived through what I did: living in a basement, wrapped in a damp blanket, eating ramen, with no idea what to do next.

My aunt and uncle were against me studying music—especially my uncle, on the grounds that there had never been a musician in our family so I couldn't possibly have the talent for it, not to mention music school was expensive and there weren't any future prospects. They probably thought I wasn't serious and that I would follow their advice in the end, but their words hit me right in the ribs, and I felt my chest swell up as if in a knee-jerk reflex. No exaggeration.

When I was a child, grandma told me to fight for what was mine and let go of what wasn't. I asked her how to tell the difference, and Grandma said, "What you can compromise on, you shouldn't fight for. There are very few things in life you should truly fight for. You will understand when you grow up."

It was easy to learn what I shouldn't fight for. As for the rest, I really had to grow up before I could tell the difference. I had to admit we didn't have anyone with musical talent in our family, but I'd never accept that *I* didn't have it. If Salinger were to stand in front of me and tell me to cut it out, that I was not made for the field, I'd give up. I didn't care what anyone else said. Sure, I couldn't afford to go to an elite conservatory, which I had never even considered, so I just chose an ordinary music school and worked while I studied. That was the only compromise I made, and was the only thing I had to fight for.

The music school I chose was not expensive. It wasn't up to the standards of the conservatories, but I still met teachers who were willing to teach me properly. It would have been a good start for my career to debut on *Super Sound*. Unfortunately, that ended up going nowhere. No prize money, no contract, nothing. If I hadn't had that conversation with Salinger, I would've probably submitted to reality. But he said I was born to do this, so what else could I do? If your hero said that to you and you still didn't have the guts to keep fighting, how could you live with yourself?

Later I went back to the basement to eat ramen and write music. I poured over the revised music score, trying to re-record the new composition the way Salinger had directed. When the new song flowed out of my headset, I was surprised to find out I actually had a pretty good voice.

I pitched the revised demo to LOTUS's record label, Yitian. Three months went by without a word. One day, I was unpacking my recording equipment to clean out the musty case and was amused to find a tiny, fingernail-sized white mushroom growing inside it. I was about to take a picture of it when an email notification popped up on my phone.

Just when I had given up hope, the music department of Yitian Entertainment reached out to me.

Yitian wanted to buy the two songs I had submitted, but they weren't going to sign me. They wanted to put the songs in the debut album of their new idol group. I was disappointed, but things were finally picking up. I plucked out the lucky mushroom and moved it outside to the garden, where I planted it under a tall tree

and hoped it would thrive.

I had no intention of becoming a ghostwriter, least of all selling the song that Salinger revised for me. I didn't want anyone other than me singing it, but then I recalled what he said to me before he left.

"I know people like us value every song we write, but don't get too attached. After all, songs are written to be heard. As long as you aren't breaking your principles, don't obsess over it."

Two days later, I met with the head of the music department. He was a producer I'd been hearing about for some time, and made me a generous offer—but it had to be a buyout. I tried to fight for royalties, and the producer was very honest in his reply.

"It's true. Some songwriters get royalties. But a newcomer like you? I'll be honest with you, there won't be a single label that will give you royalties. Even if there are, they won't have the influence that we have. Young man, the most important thing for you right now is to build your brand, understand?"

I said I needed time to think about it, and the producer told me there would be a deadline to produce the new album. He wanted me to get back to him as soon as possible. I walked out of the office with a lot on my mind. Right as I got to the first floor, I ran into LOTUS. Who would have thought?

And it wasn't just one or two members, but the entire band, including the manager and five assistants, coming my way in a formidable procession. I was filled with excitement and anticipation—excitement because it was the first time I'd seen Ji Shi and the others in person, anticipation because I could see Salinger again.

There were no bodyguards following the band members once they entered the building, just assistants. I stood at one end of the hallway; they were coming over this way. When they came closer, I found out that Ji Shi was quite a bit taller than me; there was no evidence that he'd been lying about his height, as was rumored. Next to him was Stone, and behind him was the leader Li Xiang and Alan. Last was Salinger carrying his bass case on one shoulder.

He was still wearing his black baseball cap and a pair of dark sunglasses. His bandmates were chattering, probably about the show. Salinger just focused on walking. The girl next to him, whose crown didn't even reach his shoulders, must have been his assistant. She was holding his coat.

I didn't know if he saw me, but if he did, he didn't recognize me. I really wanted to go up and ask for autographs, but they had an intimidating air about them. I didn't dare to approach them at all, so I just stood there and watched them get into the elevator. The assistant was the last to get in. As the doors were about to close, Salinger, who had been in his own head the whole time, reached over Alan's shoulder, who was on his phone, to hold the doors. The assistant went in with her head down.

The fact that he would do so, or rather, that he would be the first to notice someone needed help, didn't surprise me at all.

I stopped hesitating the moment I saw Salinger. His appearance seemed to have made me see the whole Yitian building through rose-tinted glasses. I told the producer I wanted to meet the idol group that was going to sing my song. He looked

a little confused, but agreed.

That was how I got to meet this idol group called JUST. They worked harder than I thought they would, full of enthusiasm and fighting spirit, as if dawn had finally arrived. Most importantly, there was a young man in the group who had a similar experience as mine—he had left home to pursue his dreams, and he was also a singer-songwriter. He was really good at singing, so I asked the producer if he was the front man.

"Idol groups don't have front men, but KK *is* the lead vocal of the group."

Eventually, I decided to sell the songs. The contract was laid before me, and I uncapped the pen and turned to the last page. Before signing, I couldn't help but ask, "Can I still sing these two songs myself in the future, at all?"

The producer turned a few pages to point out a clause. "You can sing it after the exclusive license expires, as long as you don't use our arrangements and lyrics."

JUST's debut went smoothly. Although my two songs were not the main hits, their online play counts were second only to the main hits. It was a pity they edited my arrangement; the lyrics were also rewritten. The title of the song was changed to "Heart's Joy[9]," catering to young female listeners. I still liked Salinger's edits better, and preferred my own name for the song: "See You the Day After Tomorrow."

I was still writing in my basement. Due to the success of these two songs, when I pitched again, I finally started to hear back from record labels. My songs were getting chosen a lot more often now, though only a handful of them actually sold, and the ones that did sell usually went to singers who weren't particularly famous—mostly B and C-list idols. But now, when I wasn't eating instant noodles, I could afford to go to Haidilao Hot Pot[10] occasionally to improve my diet. The waiters would put stuffed toys in the seat opposite to mine. After a few times, I noticed that it was always the same Keroro Gunso toy. It was like meeting an old friend. Thoughtful gestures like these from the waiters were an extraordinarily warm experience for an outsider like me, who still spoke with an accent.

The restaurant happened to be playing "Heart's Joy." The waiter said the manager really liked this song, so I told him I had written it. "Really?" I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, but I didn't care. It'd been a long time since I'd felt that sense of accomplishment after participating in *Super Sound.* But these days, I didn't need to get it from the recognition of others.

The next song on the playlist was LOTUS's. It was written by Stone-*ge*, a popular one, and I had a good time listening even though it wasn't by Salinger. Eating hot pot, I sought the Double Bass with my ears—plucking away the loud noises, plucking away Ji Shi's voice, plucking away the guitar and the drums. Behind the fog of colorful noises was the bass that vibrated like never-ending heartbeats.

What bass meant to a band was what Salinger was to LOTUS. It might be hard for the untrained ear to pick up his presence, but it really wouldn't work without him. He held LOTUS up as securely as the foundation did a building.

He didn't need anyone to recognize that.

The internet helped me a lot. I published some unsold tunes on an original music site, where they received very little attention at first, but then I was discovered and recommended by some musicians. Some of my friends suggested I add my masterpieces to my profile, detailing my inspirations and such. My followers also encouraged me to post more photos.

Musicians were generally thin-skinned. I would have been embarrassed to do that in the past, but now I've gotten over it. If you couldn't even throw away this childish shame, what gave you the right to talk of dreams? After some marketing work, the play counts really started to grow. Even fans who had followed *Super Sound* before found their way here.

While those play counts didn't convert to cash, they did feed my dream and help it to grow.

In November, I went to see LOTUS live. All I could afford was a ticket in the nosebleed seats. The last time I went to one of their concerts was in my second year of high school. I earned my first ticket by helping people with homework online and making deliveries from off-campus restaurants. I went to see them with my *xuejie*[11]. Thinking back on it, I was pretty lame; going to a concert with a girl and making her buy her own ticket. Luckily, that person was my *xuejie*.

It was the same old spot in the left stands, and it was like that first concert all over again. As before, the concert was perfect. Even when Ji Shi's voice cracked, it was still perfect because his voice always cracked at the most emotional parts. Speaking of that, a lot of people claimed that Ji Shi was not a qualified singer because his voice always cracked when he got too excited, but the strange thing was, fans didn't mind at all—it was because he was so into it, so those broken notes were like the sparks that came out when lava is too hot. There was a special appeal to it.

But the whole time I was listening to Salinger's bass, and my eyes were fixed on him. I felt like a treasure hunter trudging through thorns, oblivious to the magnificent treasures of the forest and only having eyes for the less-than-glamorous Holy Grail.

The one person who had the least interaction with the fans was Salinger. During the intermission, Ji Shi put the microphone to Salinger's mouth. The bassist just pointed it to his bass.

Ji Shi asked the fans, "He wants to perform a bass solo. Should we let him do that, or MC for us?"

Almost all the female voices were yelling "MC," and almost all the male voices were yelling "Solo."

"A solo might be better then," Ji Shi said. "He could MC for ten seconds tops, but he could probably last two minutes playing a solo." He asked the whole audience, "You guys want to hear a cool solo or a showy[12] solo?"

This time there was unanimity. Tens of thousands of people collectively shouted "showy" and then laughed all together. I shouted and laughed along with them.

Ji Shi patted Salinger on the shoulder. "Time to show off, handsome."

That was not a problem for Salinger. He gave his fans an impeccable slap solo

that day.

Someone uploaded a clip of the solo to social media that night. The name "Salinger" alone called countless guitarists and bassists to worship.

--*"What a breathtakingly spectacular slap solo…"*

--*"It's showy* and *hardcore. Just awesome! They're lucky the guitarist was Stone. Who else could handle a bassist that good??"*

--*"If that's how he plays the bass, I can't imagine what his guitar skills are like."*

It was not an unreasonable conjecture. The bass was much, much harder to play well than the guitar.

--*"Salinger started out as a guitar player, right? I remember there was a show where Stone said that because Salinger's bass playing was so fucking good, he couldn't slack off at all. That's why Stone can play the guitar so well now. Otherwise, he would've been humiliated to death by Salinger's bass…"*

--*"Did Stone actually say 'so fucking good'?"*

--*"Nah, that was me, but I got the feeling he wanted to say that."*

--*"Hahahahahahaha, was Salinger on that show? What did he say?"*

--*"Quote unquote: The lead guitar is too lame. I'm too good for that."*

--*"Lead guitarists, how can you not be intimidated by that?!"*

Et cetera…

When I came back from that concert, my head was full of ideas and inspiration. I finished a song in one night.

A week later, I released the new song on the website. I named it "*Catcher in the Rye*." I added a little bass slap and drum duet just before the chorus, which a lot of people liked, though a lot of my followers thought it was an electric guitar playing low notes.

It was probably my first hit. It climbed to the top of the billboard on the website, and I started getting more and more contacts from producers, agencies, and TV shows wanting to buy the rights to use the song or perform it. Then one morning, a phone call from Yitian Entertainment woke me up.

This time, it wasn't the head of the music department, but a female agent who called herself Wendy.

If I did end up as a singer-songwriter someday and managed to write a memoir in my old age, I'd write that Salinger was my first talent scout and Wendy-*jie* my second. Even though I'm not signed with her anymore—I'm not even an entertainer now—I'm still grateful to her. Without her, what came after wouldn't have happened.

A lot of people knew her because of the boy bands and girl groups she made famous, but few knew that, in her youth, she dreamt of becoming a singer herself.

"But I didn't have the talent," she confessed with a laugh the day she asked me to meet her for coffee. "Who would have thought I'd become an agent? Which is fine. I've still got a foot in my dream."

She wanted to sign me for one reason only: she wanted to present a successful singer. Not a celebrity, but a *singer*.

"This person has to have talent—a good voice, good singing, and good looks. I think you're the one, Chi Nan."

It was the first time I'd ever been hit with such a straightforward compliment. It didn't even feel real. I wondered if she overestimated me. I hated to admit that I wasn't good, but there must be something very inadequate about me to have remained not famous at all until today.

Wendy-*jie* said, "Be confident. Even if you don't believe in yourself, you have to trust my taste."

And so, opportunity fell right out of the sky. I signed with Yitian Entertainment as a singer-songwriter. The company planned for me to go down the path of an alternative rock musician. I was excited to see my dream come true, but besides that, there was another kind of anticipation threatening to break out of my heart—I was finally getting close to my hero.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

After signing with Yitian Entertainment, I immediately started recording my first mini-album. Wendy said to strike while the iron was hot. Although we were in the same agency now, I had few opportunities to meet any legendary bands like LOTUS. Entertainers mostly worked outside of the studio, anyway. The only place in the company building a band would frequent was the rehearsal rooms. I spent most of my days at home writing or recording music at the studio. Occasionally I'd go to the rehearsal rooms, but even then, I had nothing to do with them—LOTUS had its own exclusive rehearsal room.

One day, I went to the company to get the signed contract from Wendy. As I was leaving, Xu Zhang-*ge* suddenly called out to me. He stopped us and straight after told Wendy he needed to borrow me. I was surprised. He took me downstairs in a hurry without further explanation.

Only after we got into the car did Xu Zhang explain to me, "We need you to save a show somewhere. The pianist had to leave to deal with an emergency. The performance will begin in two hours. I can't find anyone to replace the pianist so last minute. I remember Wendy said you're good with a piano, right?"

My heart skipped a beat. I asked whose show it was.

"LOTUS's," he said.

The pause stretched on. Xu Zhang turned to look at me. Only then did I come back to myself and nod at him eagerly.

"It's not a big concert. It's just a small charity sing-along," Xu Zhang explained.

It was in Jiangnan Hall. Compared to LOTUS's usual concert venues that could easily hold thirty to fifty thousand people, an auditorium like this one that only held a thousand people was indeed quite small.

I crossed through backstage with Xu Zhang. Drum beats came from the door leading to the main stage. Xu Zhang looked back at me and smiled.

“You look steady and grounded. I must have found the right person.”

I answered with a wry smile. *Yeah, well, I might* look *composed…*

As we pushed open the door, a beam of light swept across the stage in front of me. The light operators were testing the lights. The staff were setting up microphones for the instruments. Xu Zhang brought his hands together and introduced me to the musicians present.

“Chi Nan, the company's newly-signed singer-songwriter, has come to your rescue.”

More than twenty people at the scene suddenly looked at me, including Ji Shi, who was standing in front of the microphone.

“*Rescue”? Really? You can’t just say things like that. Xu Zhang*-ge*, why are you throwing me under the bus?*

I quickly took a bow. As I bent over, I thought if there was a mic on the ground right now, it would have picked up my 180-decibel heartbeat—it was so loud and low-pitched. I’d been a LOTUS fan for almost five years now, and I never thought I’d get to perform their work with the actual band in the flesh.

But time was running out. This was clearly not the time for me to deliver my *“I’m a LOTUS fan, and it’s an absolute honor to accompany you guys on the piano. I couldn’t imagine this happening even in my wildest dreams”* speech, so I listened carefully to the piano parts that the leader, Li Xiang, explained to me.

When Stone passed me, he said, “Don’t worry! You look composed. I’m sure there won’t be any problem!”

He was acting like he didn’t care, but I knew deep down he must have worried that I’d messed up my part. All I needed to do was to make a promise to them, but I didn’t expect the guitarist from LOTUS to pat me on the shoulder—the man whose lyrics had been carved on desks and bathroom walls by my friends, and admired by so many people, tapped me on the shoulder amiably. As soon as he did, a leaf from the sheet music fell out of my hands. The look Stone gave me right then almost looked like despair.

After taking my place behind the designated keyboard, I familiarized myself with the sheet music. They were new songs. One was very obviously written by Stone; the other was in typical Salinger style. The latter had more piano solos in it. I went over the score a few more times, imagining what kind of song it would be when everyone played it together. Tracing the notes he had written, the song slowly began to take shape in my mind.

I didn’t see Salinger on stage. I heard footsteps and Xu Zhang’s voice behind me.

“I got you a last-minute keyboard player. He just got signed with the company. He should do fine.”

He was probably talking to one of the musicians coming in from backstage. I was so focused on familiarizing myself with the score that I didn’t care. There was a moment of silence behind me when no one answered. It was as if there was a pull in this brief silence, as if I had suddenly turned on my fanboy radar—and I realized that the person coming in from backstage was Salinger.

“He looks calm,” Salinger mumbled, breaking the few seconds of quiet scrutiny

from behind me.

As the two men passed by, I could smell the faint scent of tobacco and a hint of menthol on Salinger, probably from chewing a piece of gum after a cigarette in the staff room. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I thought of him watching me from behind while I was "calmly" reading the score.

Once all the members were in position, the tuning began, starting with Alan's drum set. One by one, he tuned the bass drum, snare drum, and hi-hat. Then came the bassist's turn.

Although it was only tuning, it still was the first time I'd heard Salinger's bass up close. As soon as he plucked the strings, my heart trembled with the heavy bass. Even after his fingers left the strings, the impact didn't die down for a long time.

I was about to accompany this guy's bass. At the thought of this, all the tension that had been building up was replaced by buzzing anticipation.

After tuning, Stone suggested we start the rehearsal off with the new songs. The lead keyboard player for LOTUS was the leader Li Xiang, but there was quite a bit of electric accompaniment in both songs, and there were times when the piano parts were parallel to the electric keyboard parts, so another keyboard player was needed.

The piano part wasn't hard for me. My eyes swept over the music score as I played while counting down to the next bar, where Salinger's bass would join in.

The bass met my left root note exactly. I looked toward Salinger, who wasn't looking at me—he was playing along with my piano. The dynamic bass line gave the music a rock and roll feel to it, and then the drums and electric sounds joined in. The prelude sounded so good it could impregnate your ears.

After a rundown of the new song, Stone applauded. "Nan's not bad; the piano was a bit stiff at first, but then the bass came in and he killed it!"

I was so relieved to hear that.

After two hours of rehearsal, the fans had already assembled outside, and the sing-along started on time. People who would come to this kind of fan meeting were generally old fans; LOTUS held this event regularly and donated all the profits to charity. They would only perform seven songs, but there would be more interactive sessions than a regular concert.

We opened with the new song, "Gravity." It was very lyrical, very Brit rock-ish, so the added piano was not surprising. Even though there was no lyrics book yet, I knew right away that this was Salinger's work.

I still couldn't help but focus on the bass line. There was a bridge in the middle where the guitar rolled back and forth between two octaves as wonderfully as a rainbow in the blue sky. While everyone was captivated by Stone's dazzling performance, I wondered if anyone had noticed that the bass had seeped like blood into the flesh and bones of the guitar.

This bass line was not overly complex, but not simplistic either. It also rolled, giving the guitar an indescribable explosion and rhythm; almost a soaring power.

Every rock band dreamed of having a bassist like Salinger—he wrote good lyrics and songs and was an impeccable performer, but never showed off his talent. Only after the loss of his bass line would people miss his astonishing rhythm—he was the

soul of LOTUS as a rock band!

Halfway through the concert, during the interactive session, fans started asking Salinger to say something. At first, he pretended not to hear them, but then everyone clapped and shouted in unison, so he had to start thinking of what to talk about.

“What am I supposed to say when they’ve said everything there is to say?”

A fan shouted from offstage, “How do you spend Valentine’s Day?”

Stone mocked, “Every day is Valentine’s Day for him.”

The fans burst out laughing.

Salinger added, “Don't worry. Still single. No girlfriend.”

Laughs again.

Stone wouldn’t let this go. “You’d better be!”

Salinger looked at him. “It’s true this time. It recently occurred to me that it would be nice to get a boyfriend. Someone like you.”

The retort was effective. All the girls screamed in the audience.

Stone sneered. “I’m out of your league!”

“Yeah? Try going out with me, and maybe you’ll change your mind.”

Even in jest, Salinger was still the cool bassist with a magnetic voice. The way he spoke, he could make anything sound real. He was just casually talking to Stone—maybe they talked like this all the time, but clearly that was not what the fans were thinking. It was driving the fans insane.

Stone cupped his fist and begged, “Salinger-*oppa*[13], I’m begging you, please leave me alone!”

“How about Ji Shi?” Salinger continued. The screams almost went through the roof as he looked towards the frightened lead singer at the center of the stage. “Care to go on a date with me?”

Ji Shi crossed his arms on his chest and shook his head at the incorrigible bassist.

Salinger looked back at Alan. The young drummer immediately made a merciless X with his drumsticks.

Li Xiang, too, said, “Don’t you look at me. You’re not my cup of tea. I like the innocent type.”

Implied to be less than innocent in front of a whole audience, Salinger looked positively abashed. “Why are y’all attacking me all of a sudden? Bassists are good people. You don’t have to love me, but please don’t hurt me[14].”

The fans laughed knowingly. Before Salinger, bassists had difficulty getting public attention. They were always invisible in any given band.

Ji Shi squatted on one side of the stage, where a female fan in the first row covered her mouth, her eyes glistening.

Ji Shi asked, “What’s wrong? Are you a bassist too? Were you hit by Salinger’s truth bombs?”

The girl shook her head. A microphone was handed down before the girl choked

out, “The last time I heard Salinger say that much”—she held out three fingers —“was three years ago.”

Some might find it overdramatic, but I felt that on a spiritual level. Fans are strange people who are grateful for the least bit of response from their idols.

Ji Shi turned to glare at Salinger and shouted, “Look what you’ve put our fans through! Any gesture?”

Salinger bowed his head to remove his bass, then came over to jump off the stage amidst the envious gasps of the crowd and gave the girl a comforting hug.

Her 6’1” idol held the 5’2” girl in one arm. It was a heartwarming sight. Whenever this sort of thing happened, I felt that it was better to be his fan than to be his lover.

After the show, I went backstage to tell people I was leaving. It was a mess backstage, with the crew moving stage props and speakers around. LOTUS’s assistants were there, too, helping the artists pack up their stuff. Amidst the chaos, I heard a girl’s voice.

“*Ge*, you can’t be serious, right? The way you looked at them when you said that; I was practically melting.”

Salinger bowed his head and put the bass in the case. He answered flatly, “How come you melt so easily?”

Stone gave a sardonic chuckle. “I’d thank God if he really were in love with any of us. Then we wouldn’t have to deal with all the dating rumors out there smearing our names!”

It was true. There was a lot of gossip about Salinger. Stone hated publicity stunts more than anything; although Salinger wasn’t doing it for publicity, Stone must still have gotten really tired of the buzz.

“I’m serious. What’s your type? Just settle down into a serious relationship. I’d rather you have fewer fans than see you like this.”

Alan hit the left drumstick with the right. “Stone’s right. If any of your rumored girlfriends would come with me, I’d happily live the rest of my life with them. You gotta be content!”

Salinger closed his instrument case. “A lifetime isn’t as simple as you make it out to be.” He didn’t let his assistant pick up the bass case, which he carried over his shoulder. “Let alone be content.”

I waited until the band had finished their conversation before going up to say goodbye. There had been many opportunities to ask, *“Salinger, do you remember me?”*, but I believed he’d forgotten about me. What might have been a year of little accomplishment for me must have been a busy and fulfilling year for Salinger. It wouldn’t be surprising if he didn’t remember me at all.

It was just that he once told me to “have faith in your favorite,” and still he forgot about me after all. It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t sad, but once the sadness had passed, I felt like it didn’t really matter.

Whether he remembered me or not, he was my hero and I was his fan, and that would never change.

TRACK 03

MY first mini-album was released just three months after I signed with Yitian. I was so excited I inevitably started worrying whether it was too fast. *Perhaps I should have taken it one step at a time.* Since they couldn't make it into a TV show's theme song or a movie ending credits song, not even an ad, Wendy-*jie* found an alternative—they would release my hit as the theme song to a public welfare short film.

Wendy-*jie* asked me if I had any thoughts on the film script before they started making it. I thought that since it was for charity, I'd better not add my own ideas. Interfering with the scriptwriter and director's job would take something out of it.

"Yitian funded the short film, so it's only fair to put in our requirements," Wendy said disapprovingly. "Otherwise, what if people only remember the ad but not the song? Just tell me what inspired you to write this song."

The answer was Salinger. But I was afraid that if I said that, Wendy would go to Salinger and ask him if he'd like to appear in the short film. Salinger might not even be able to say no when the word "charity" came out.

Surely I couldn't say that, so I said I had an image in my mind.

The image later appeared in the music video. In this scene, a little girl was talking to a young man carrying a black guitar, as inspired by the novel *Catcher in the Rye*. I said I wished the guitar had been an electric guitar; if it had been an acoustic one, it would feel too different from the song.

Of course, it would be even further from the real inspiration, Salinger.

The short film was about protecting wild animals. It told the story of a lost girl who came across a young man with a black guitar in the forest. He escorted her out of the woods. With him watching over her, she could play with the deer, wolves, and brown bears. In just one day, she established a close friendship with the animals. Years later, when the illegal wildlife trade destroyed the forest, the girl became a forest ranger and fought poachers every day. One day, she received news that she was going to be transferred elsewhere—the forest had been planned for other uses. Reluctant to leave, the girl came to the cliff and called out the name of the young man, whom she believed to be the guardian angel of the forest and who would definitely protect this place. The story unfolded against this very backdrop. It ended with the reappearance of that young man.

To match the plot of the short film, I had re-written the song to be a slow version with acoustic guitar, and with piano and strings as accompaniment for the girl and the young guitarist who met in the snowbound forest when they were young. The original version of "*Catcher in the Rye*" would be played in the scene where the girl called out to the young man from the top of the cliff.

As Wendy had predicted, the actual album sales were mediocre, but the online sales were much more gratifying. The contribution of the short couldn't be left unrecognized. The film crew went to the forest park specifically to shoot scenes like the ones in the snowy forest, where wild animals ran around and frolicked about in the snow. The choice to have the young man carry an electric guitar on his back instead of an acoustic one made the scenes interesting to watch. The actual effect was much better than the music video.

At the time, there was a popular music program called *The Best of LIVE*, And the producers bought the right to perform this song. I never thought the person who'd sing would be the legendary Gu Sunny. After that, a lot more people got to know the song.

Everything went so smoothly that I got a little uncomfortable, probably because I was used to fumbling through all the waiting. Wendy said I was the calmest newbie she'd ever met. I was far from calm, but there weren't many people here I could share my joy with, so I just hid it. Past experiences also warned me to be careful, lest I stumble.

I did meet a bit of an obstacle. When the short film went viral on Weibo, people online debated whether the young guitarist looked like Salinger. Although everything, from the title of the song to the character design of the silent young guitarist to the style of the song, was a tribute to Salinger, it wasn't until it was pointed out to me like this that I suddenly realized it was inappropriate.

I could pay tribute to his style, and I could pay tribute to his name, but why did I put a character that looked like him in the short film? I watched the short film over and over again in the middle of the night. The more I watched it, the more obvious it became; only the blind couldn't see that it was meant to be him. What would LOTUS think when they saw this short film? What would Salinger think?

But to come out at this point and admit that he was the inspiration behind the song would make it seem like I was using him for publicity more than anything else. I could only hope that the gossip would fade away sooner rather than later, but it just got worse as the song became more and more well-known every day.

One day, after logging on to the music site to check my messages, I came across a popular comment.

--*Could Salinger fans please stop being so cheeky? Or is it that anyone who is handsome, on the tall side, quiet, and carries a black musical instrument is imitating your Salinger-oppa? You can't even tell if it's a bass or a guitar in the music video.*

On this side of the screen, I felt as if I'd been punched right in the gut. I even vaguely remember this commenter's ID. I hated it when someone who liked my songs attacked Salinger. Did Salinger do anything wrong? It wasn't within his control that other people liked him and paid tribute to him.

This comment appeared at 11 pm and blew up after just over an hour.

I replied and stuck my comment to the top, "The song '*Catcher in the Rye*' is a tribute to Salinger. Everything, from the title to the style to the image of the main character in the music video, was a tribute. It's no exaggeration to call it an imitation. As anyone who has seen me in competitions should know that he is my idol. I'll only respond to this once and say no more."

I was hoping that the controversy would slowly go away. Since the music site didn't get as much attention as Weibo, it shouldn't cause any problems for Salinger, but those who wanted to know the truth would always see it.

I didn't expect to see this statement on my Weibo account the day after my comment was posted.

Although the Weibo account was registered in my name, the company was

running it. My words from the music site were reposted to Weibo verbatim. What's more, my account shared the charity short that had already been viewed by over a million people, thus putting the song and the short film back on trending.

Where it used to just say Salinger's name, there now had an @ added, which stung my eyes. It wasn't that I didn't understand why this was happening, but I still couldn't accept it. I called Wendy to ask her why she posted this and why she had to tag him.

"You've already admitted it anyway! It works better for us to send it first rather than leave it to some tabloid. Since it's a tribute, there's nothing wrong with tagging the person you're paying tribute to. Yeah, I know you hate hyping your work, but no successful artist can live without it—even LOTUS."

"I don't hate hyping, but I can't do it using his name!"

"What's the difference?" Wendy-*jie* laughed. "It's even better that it's Salinger. He's popular, and he keeps his head down. If you hype your song using some drama queen, you won't know who the winner will be. Anyway, don't be so sensitive. Salinger doesn't give a shit about any of this, not to mention that it's obviously a tribute. Frankly speaking, even if you were insulting him, he wouldn't have paid any attention. If he doesn't have the magnanimity, how would he have survived all these years of tabloid gossip?"

But it wasn't the same thing. Liking an idol was not an excuse to exploit him for whatever reason. I had already more or less crossed the line with my tribute, not to mention flaunting myself as a fan of his on Weibo. Even if you're a fan, how can you exploit your idol as much as you want? Even if he sees it, must he be the bigger person and not resent it?

I didn't argue with Wendy. All she did was come along for the ride; I couldn't blame her. I just said I wanted to manage my Weibo account by myself from now on.

"I can give you the Weibo password, but I would recommend you not to touch that post. Its influence is already there, and it's more positive than negative for you. Even if some of Salinger's fans think it's self-promotion, they won't attack you, but deleting it won't remove those influences. It will make you look erratic, and that's what the trolls are after."

"Thank you, *jie*. I understand," I said. "Send me the Weibo password, please."

Wendy hung up the phone and texted me the Weibo account username and password a short while later with a message: "Think it over."

I deleted the post. Having already carried a reputation for self-promotion, it was nothing to add capriciousness to my name if it reduced the likelihood of Salinger seeing it. I didn't want to disturb him in this way, and I was even more afraid of blackmailing him into producing a response.

Wendy eventually respected what I did, but she later asked me, "Have you ever wondered what Salinger would think if he really saw you admitting that out of the blue and then deleted it again all of a sudden?"

I did think about it. If he had heard my songs, if he remembered me, he would have said to have faith in him.

I was 22 years old that year. My career had just started, and I was one step closer

to the man I idolized the most, the man four years older than me—the bassist in the legendary band LOTUS. Fans called him Salinger, and it was because of him that I wrote the song "*Catcher in the Rye*."

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

After the success of "*Catcher in the Rye*," a TV show bought the rights to use it as an end credits song. I was asked to play along when the cast was promoting the show. It was exhausting. I hadn't sung live for more than a year now, but it was very satisfying, even though I was only there for one song and there was no interaction with the audience. I knew most people didn't even come for my song. If you were to think about it, that was all I ever wanted—to sing my own songs to people who would listen. Even if I touched them for just a minute, I'd feel like I was making a difference.

Besides being able to sing live from time to time, there was one more occasion for celebration—I moved out of that basement. It was a cause for celebration, but when the time came, I still felt a bit sad. Many tenants must have lived in this basement before me. But to the basement, all those tenants were just passers-by. Their successes, their failures, the tidiness, the mess, the grumpy ones...they were all just passing through. The basement would always be the basement, damp, cramped, and dark. If the house had a soul, wouldn't it want an owner?

But it must have wondered. *How would I deserve to be owned?*

Sunlight came in through the only narrow window when I left, stretching long across the floor. I closed the door. I couldn't be its owner, but I could remember it forever if I put it in a song.

The melodies and lyrics come to mind in snippets. In the following month, more inspirations, big and small, had been born than in the previous twenty-two years combined. Even sleeping became a bare necessity. I wish I could write for 12 hours and sing for another 12 each day.

One day as I was working on a radio program, my ears suddenly felt strange. For just a short while, I felt as if my left ear was muffled. I took off the headset and patted the ear, but it didn't get any better, so much so that I would hear a click whenever I swallowed. This happened occasionally when I wore headphones for a long time, so I didn't take it seriously and went home to rest after the recording.

The symptoms did not improve over the next three days. With so much work and no time to go to the hospital, I went to a nearby clinic, where the doctor didn't find anything wrong with me. He told me I was probably overworked, and that if I had lost a lot of weight in a short period of time, the sharp weight loss could also cause discomfort in the ears.

I started eating meals regularly. A week went by, and something was still wrong with one ear. The clicking sound was still there when I drank. There was a constant imbalance in what my ears could hear, which caused a lot of problems for my singing and composing.

I got nervous. What if it was an ear infection or something? What if I had to take a long break just after my career had started? But it turned out to be worse than I thought.

The doctor told me my ear was severely diseased. My ear canal was damaged. I couldn't work as hard as I was working. I could no longer sing.

"It's serious. The loudspeakers are aggravating it at a rapid pace, so you really should rest at home," the doctor said as he took notes on the computer.

He made it sound so casual at first that I didn't see how serious it was. I asked how long I would have to rest for and whether it would get better if I got enough rest whilst taking medication.

The bespectacled, middle-aged doctor turned to look at me. "It will not get better. There is no cure or medicine for it. If you get good rest, you can slow down the deterioration, but if you don't and you put your ears right next to a high-powered speaker, you could go deaf."

I couldn't believe it. Peering at the doctor's stern profile as he stared at the screen, I tried to find clues that he was trying to scare me.

As he printed out the prescription, I couldn't help but ask, "Has anyone ever been cured of this?"

He sighed. "The worst-case scenario is irreversible hearing loss, but some people go completely deaf within a few years, and some don't get there until they're old. Curing it is impossible, but if you treat your ears well, it's possible to keep your hearing for a few more years. It's up to you." Then he shook his head. "You've shown these symptoms for quite some time. You should have come to check it out sooner. You shouldn't have put it off…"

Holding the prescription note in one hand, my heart sank to the bottom of my chest. This wasn't a stern attempt to scare the patient in vain by exaggerating his condition; this was the look of a medical practitioner expressing his helplessness to his patient.

On my way out of the hospital, I grasped my phone as if it was my life support. I wondered if I should call someone, but it was just a passing thought. My grandma was no longer here. If she was still alive, I probably would not have told her the news anyway, but at such times I'd still be able to call her and listen to her voice.

It was only when I walked into the metro station that I noticed I was drenched in rain. The only thing I could think of was, *I can't tell Wendy yet. Let's just wait a while.*

The rain was pouring down when I arrived at the company. All I could think about was why God was doing this to me. I wasn't afraid of hitting rock bottom in my career, nor afraid of starting all over again, nor afraid of struggling for ten or twenty years and still living in the basement. But how could I overcome such an obstacle?

The sound of a rumbling engine came suddenly. I froze as the black motorbike rushed toward me. I thought it was going to hit me head-on, but it quickly evaded me and skidded to a halt in a white spray of rain-filled water. The wave created by the rear wheels of the bike was so powerful that I felt as if I had been pushed to the ground by it.

The sound of the water died down a little. Now I could see the traffic lights on the other side of the road, which was still red.

The rider lifted his goggles. He looked surprised to see me scrambling up. "It's

you?”

I recognized the dark, deep voice and looked up to see Salinger in his biker’s helmet, the rain thudding on the shoulders of his aviator jacket.

He was my idol, my dream and my motivation, but instead of being someone I could find a little comfort in at this time, it felt more like a final blow. It was so ironic.

I was like a drowning man. I saw him standing on the shore, but I couldn’t call for help.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

The assistant, fixing her make-up, was shocked to see Salinger walk into the break room soaked in rain.

“Why are you riding in the rain?”

Salinger seemed immune to such complaints. He took off his backpack, placed it on the coffee table, and ignored her question. The girl poured a mug of hot water for him, thrusting a towel into his hands, then hurried off again to get some pills. Salinger turned and handed me the towel and water before taking off his drenched jacket. I had no choice but to hold the stuff for him.

When I thought about it later, if he just wanted to put his stuff somewhere, he could have just put it on the coffee table. He obviously meant for me to use it, except my brain stopped working whenever I was around him—and he was a man who happened to dislike explaining himself with acts of kindness. He was difficult to understand to begin with.

When the wet jacket was taken off and hung on the back of the chair, something fell out of the pocket of his clothes. The car keys. Salinger bent over to pick them up. He was now wearing only a white T-shirt, and as he bent over, I noticed what looked like a tattoo on the left side of his waist. In my fleeting glance, the half-hidden ink looked like a string of letters.

Despite being the bassist of a rock band, Salinger was never known to wear jewelry or have any tattoos. It was a small shock when I discovered that he *was* tattooed, and that it was on his waist—or perhaps on his hips. For a while, I forgot about my own nightmare and wondered what it was.

Salinger brought the chair close to the couch he was sitting on and concentrated on wringing the cuffs of his jacket, his head bowed. The exterior material of his aviator jacket was glossy, so it didn’t look like it had been drenched in rain. With a flick of his wrists, a stream of water fell into the bin, effectively pulling me out of my reverie. I thought, with some amusement, that he really was bass-heavy in everything he did.

“The water and the towel are for you.” He looked up at me in the midst of it. “Take off your backpack. It’s soaked.”

I was reminded that I still had a pile of music sheets and a songbook filled with inspirations in my bag and hastened to open it to check. Fortunately, though the bag was not waterproof, nothing was wet.

As I turned over the sheets, Salinger had stopped wringing out his clothes. He

looked at me, or rather at the score in my hands. His damp hands dropped onto his lap. Caught myself acting like a fool fussing over my half-finished pieces in front of this legend, I shoved the sheets back in the bag and returned them to the coffee table. But my pants were still wet and I couldn't sit anywhere comfortably, so I might as well stand.

He was probably used to meeting the eyes of his fans (or paparazzi) by accident, so he wasn't uncomfortable with the over-cautiousness I showed. He looked at the glass of water on the table. I picked it up and was about to say thank you when the assistant pushed through the door and passed a packet of cold capsules to Salinger. She turned to see the glass in my hand, a look of surprise on her face. Behind her, Salinger shoved the capsules to one side and asked if I was hurt. I said I was fine, but noticed that the assistant didn't look pleased, so I put down the water I was not drinking.

"Sorry I almost made you crash."

Now his assistant looked practically hostile.

Salinger said, "Just remember to look at traffic lights from now on."

The words came without reproach. I was sure he often issued reminders to his fans when they did stupid stuff. *Remember to look at the stairs and the road from now on instead of staring at me.*

He didn't remember that I was his fan.

I nodded, and Wendy called to see if I'd arrived at the office. I hung up the phone and said goodbye to Salinger, then walked to the door—when suddenly he stopped me again.

"Wait a minute."

I turned to see him staring at me.

"Where have I met you before?"

"At your singalong. Xu Zhang-*ge* asked me to stand in for the keyboardist for you guys."

"It wasn't that. Of course I remember that time."

My heart thudded as I looked at his face. I could tell he was trying to recall. I had the urge to tell him right there. *You were the motivation that held me together for the past year and a half. I was the musician you called "talented."*

I've kept your words in mind for a long time.

But what was the point of talking about it now? I wasn't anybody before, and I never would become anybody in the future.

"Then *qianbei* probably remembered it wrong."

I smiled as I said it, with a subtle sense of shame. I knew I didn't have to be ashamed of my ears. It was not my fault, yet it lingered in his presence.

It was as if I had thrown away all the "talent" he had found.

I didn't tell Wendy about my ears, just confirmed with her the schedule for the day after tomorrow. I came home with a bit of a cold. Worried that the sneezing was

aggravating my ears, I planned to go downstairs to get some meds. When I opened my backpack to get my wallet, I found a slab of cold capsules in it.

So when Salinger shoved it away, he shoved it into my backpack?

I plunked down on the couch, holding the pills. The packaging still held a trace of cold wetness from Salinger's hands. I popped a capsule and put it in my hand, laughing a little at the thought of him giving it to me simply because he didn't want to take it, pretending nothing had happened.

I filled the bathtub with hot water that night. It'd only been two weeks since I moved to this studio apartment, so the tub hadn't been used yet. Lying in it, either because of the flu capsule or my ear, the sound of water sounded like tides in a dream, the white mist before my eyes unreal.

When I was little, I promised my grandmother that I would buy her a bathtub in the future so that she wouldn't get cold in the winter. Even such a small wish failed to come true.

Sooner or later, I would have to accept that my ears were no longer working—just as it would be possible, years from now, to be numb enough to stop tearing up when I saw the painful loss of a loved one on TV. Just what would I be like then? Wearing hearing aids? Or would hearing aids not work either, and I'd have to use sign language? Would I ever speak again? Could I still remember the melodies of those songs? Would the name Salinger feel any different to me?

I was afraid of becoming like that.

If God were to ask me what I wanted to do before I went completely deaf, I'd say that I'd like to write fifty more songs, go to ten more LOTUS concerts, and have my fond memory of music imprinted on me a little deeper. If that was too greedy, I didn't mind giving a discount. I wouldn't feel bad about exchanging half my lifespan for the opportunity to listen to music for a few more years. I didn't want to live a deaf life, even if I were given another 500 years of glory and wealth.

Unfortunately, no one could negotiate with fate. I just wished that time would pass a little bit slower, and my hearing and singing days could last longer.

The doctor might be right, but instead of trembling in fear of the moment when all sounds would fade away, I would rather indulge myself in a final immersion in music—like a cancer patient traveling the world before he drew his last breath. I wrote and sang songs as usual. I didn't want to regret anything when I actually went deaf.

But in the end, paper couldn't smother fire. When I went into the studio a month later to record my new EP, my eardrums were struck by the backing track in my monitor headphones, and my left ear became muffled again. I could have asked to pause, but I just didn't want to. A surge of anger rose in my heart. But as my chest resonated with the music, I suddenly felt pins and needles in my ears, causing me to cover my headphones in pain. The recording was interrupted. The recordist, who'd never seen anything like this before, thought it was a problem with the equipment.

"It's fine, dude. The headphones are fine. Let's finish the song."

The recordist looked as if he'd seen a ghost—maybe I looked aggressive. He agreed to continue recording. When the last chorus was finished, I saw Wendy come in. Without interrupting me, she stood by the door until the recording was over.

She seemed to have guessed everything when she saw me. That afternoon, she accompanied me to the hospital. When I came out, neither of us spoke for a long time before she said that it wasn't a big deal—that I had a long life ahead of me, and that there were many possibilities.

But the possibility of going down the music route was gone forever.

I said, "I've finished recording both songs on the new EP. Can I keep the master tapes?"

Wendy didn't say anything. She just nodded.

"Thank you, Wendy-*jie*."

Everything went quiet for the next week, except for a couple of phone calls between Wendy and me—she said she was sorry, but she had to tell the higher-ups about my situation.

"But rest assured," she said, "there will be no termination fee. We're all very sorry."

I couldn't call the company ruthless—after all, it was not a charity organization. If I were blind, they might still give me a chance to be a blind singer, but God wanted me to end up like Beethoven when I was not Beethoven.

I said I understood. At least I could still write songs for the company, couldn't I?

I wasn't deaf yet. I didn't want others to treat me as a quasi-deaf person, to watch their tone around me as if I'd become deaf or depressed if they spoke any louder. If I didn't sing, I could always write songs for another couple of years.

"Of course, good work is always welcome. The most important thing for you now is to adjust your mindset." Wendy said, "Whether you can sing or not isn't that important once you get used to it. Some people leave the stage and still become successful, like LOTUS. Salinger also retreated behind the scenes to become an instrumentalist."

I was stunned. I didn't know that.

"It was hearsay," said Wendy, "Salinger used to be the lead vocal. His voice was very different back then, but he had an accident that injured his vocal cords. Later, he became a guitarist. When LOTUS first started out, it was said that he was supposed to be the guitarist, but because Stone's guitar was also great, someone had to compromise. In the end, Salinger did. Many people didn't understand at the time; they felt that Salinger was wasting his talent. Some of LOTUS's early fans even blamed Stone for that. But Stone said it was enough for the guitar to be of his caliber, but the bass should never settle for anything less."

Wendy didn't know rock, but I understood what that meant. Salinger was very talented with musical instruments, and if anyone wanted to switch from guitar to bass, he was the only one who could do it best. The bass, unlike the guitar, was an instrument that was easy to learn but difficult to master, yet it was the invisible soul of a rock band. Only when the bassline was exciting could the live performance be exciting; only when the bassline was powerful could the live performance be powerful. If you were satisfied with just laying down a bass line and a rhythm, it didn't matter who played it, but if you wanted to take your band to the top of the world, you had to have the best bassist—who could not only play bass well, but also write and handle bass lines. There were plenty of good guitarists, but such bassists

were so rare that only Salinger could do it.

Before long, Salinger became proficient in bass, and LOTUS's rock music came out thick and heavy, leaving other bands in the dust.

From the point of view of the profit-driven entertainment industry, one would say that LOTUS became a legend thanks to Ji Shi's visuals and Salinger's gossip. But all rock fans knew that LOTUS stood above so many because of its talented bassist. If you'd been to one of their live shows, you'd know that, even if Ji Shi broke his voice another hundred times, Salinger's bass line had a thousand ways to astound you.

I had no idea Salinger went through that. He was a blank page on the internet, cool and mysterious. I shouldn't have thought so, but I found a bit of comfort in knowing he only really became my idol after he switched from being the vocalist to the guitarist and then finally to the bassist.

The process of terminating the contract with the company didn't go well, as I'd signed a newbie's label deal back then—which meant the copyrights of all my songs belonged to the company during the term of the contract. Since it was going to be terminated, I wanted to try and get back the copyrights of the songs on the mini album that had already been released, but the company wouldn't agree.

It wasn't Wendy who negotiated the contract with me. It was the commissioner in charge of contracts in the company's copyright department, who was quite indifferent to my demands—and, naturally, had the right to be indifferent to me since those were the terms of the contract. He said the company could offer an additional buyout fee, but the copyrights would remain with the company. He then stood up, acting all busy, and asked me to leave.

"Think about it. Make an appointment once you make up your mind."

The moment he pulled the door open, I could see in his eyes he thought I was relying on my deafness to gain sympathy and take advantage of the label.

But I still had to put away my pride and fight.

"Wang-*laoshi*, even if the company doesn't have my songs, you still have so many good songs and artists. I only have these. I can't sing now, and there may be a day when I can't even write. If the company takes all the copyrights of these songs, then I'll really have nothing."

Was that sad? Maybe. The pathetic thing wasn't that I was going deaf, it was the fact that I had to use my deafness for sympathy. If I didn't have an ear disease, if I could write as many songs as I wanted in the future, would I still take these songs so seriously?

He shrugged at me and said, "Young man, I can't help you. That's how the contract was signed. It wouldn't be sensible for you to do that."

"Put away your sense. Where's your heart?"

The voice came out of nowhere, but I was familiar with it, so I was even more surprised. The commissioner turned to look as I stared out the door. On the couch in the corridor sat a man in a black jacket, slim black pants, and boots, hunching as he scrolled on his phone.

"Ah." The commissioner recognized the newcomer.

Salinger looked up. “Is there any humanity in what you’re doing?”

The contract specialist looked at me. “I sympathize with what he’s going through, but emotions have nothing to do with commercial contra…”

“Understood.” Salinger got up and interrupted him. He looked over at me. “Do you want the full copyrights of your songs back?”

Suddenly seeing him dulled my brain again. I recalled that day when the wave of water splashed down on me, stirred up by his wheels. I drowned in self-pity then, telling myself the gods had sent him to give me one last blow. Shame on me. How could Salinger be a blow to me?

I wanted those songs, my songs. I gave him a very definite nod of the head. This man still had the power to lift me up with a single word of his, whether encouragement or advice.

“You’ve signed the contract. I don’t think you’ll get it back that way,” said Salinger. “I have a proposal.”

“What proposal?” I was all ears for any proposal.

“I’ll buy the rights to all your songs; in return, you’ll come work for me as my personal assistant.”

I thought I’d started hearing things.

The commissioner looked incredulously at Salinger. “Wait a minute, this…isn’t appropriate, is it? Will Xu Zhang approve?”

That must have crossed a private line. Salinger scowled at the specialist. I couldn’t see what was in his eyes, but the man fell silent. Only then did Salinger hand me his phone.

“Which songs do you want to have back?”

On the screen was my page on the music site, with all my releases to date. I bowed my head and selected the songs I wanted back, seven in all.

He picked up the phone and asked if that was all.

I nodded. “But *qianbei*…”

Salinger said to the commissioner, “Seven songs. Ask the company to make an offer,” then to me, “Have you thought about it? Would you like to be my assistant? Associate, to be precise. In addition to helping me with my daily life, I’d like to hear your suggestions in music.”

I had so many buts and whys, but he gave me such a serious look that I just couldn’t raise the question. I wondered whether this was real, or if it was just a Salinger joke that sounded serious.

But perhaps my faith in him was too strong to treat it as a joke after all.

I hadn’t even thought about what I would do after the contract termination. All I could think about was the tiny basement, and the criticism and stares that I would have to face back home, but now another path lay in front of me, one I could never dream of. I never thought I’d end up working as an artist’s PA after all these years of hard work, but when the opportunity was put in front of me, I found that I couldn’t really resist it.

Because he was Salinger.

I came to this city to pursue my dream, and he was the very epitome of that dream.

“Associate or assistant, I’m fine with either,” I said.

Salinger nodded. “Then let’s talk about the contract before my childish bandmates get here.”

TRACK 04

WALKING into a small conference room, I saw him pull out a chair. The corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. He looked at me.

"How are you holding up?"

It was a faint smile. After all, he was not the smiling type. He posed the question to me like a partner-in-crime asking if the prank was exciting. Fei-*jie* hit the nail right on the head when she said rock stars like Salinger never stuck to the script. Some people were born rebellious. Expressive Stone-*ge* was one of them; Salinger, though reticent, was no different. I wasn't even sure if he'd stood up for me because he couldn't bear the injustice, or if he just wanted to humiliate the copyright guy.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Why did I help you? There's no agenda. You're a good songwriter, and talented; now you've hit a wall. I also happen to need a new PA."

"You really want me to be your PA?" *You're not just saying that to stop the bullies?*

Salinger paused the hand that was removing his glove, looking more surprised than I was. "Why else would I have said it?"

"But don't you already have a PA?"

"You mean Siyi? She's been my PA for two years, but last week I found out she's been postponing her graduation for a year. So I'm about to let her go. I asked you, and you said yes. I understand your momentary excitement. Now that you know I'm not joking, are you still up for the job?"

I nodded eagerly before shaking my head solemnly. "It wasn't an impulsive decision."

"Does it feel like a waste of your talent?"

Salinger peered into my eyes. He always looked like he was observing people under a bright sun, as if he could see a person right down to their bones, but not in an oppressive way. His gaze was just sharp enough to grip your attention.

"I can't even sing anymore. There's nothing to waste," I said self-deprecatingly. "If you had asked me to be an assistant to just anyone? Honestly, I'd have said no. But you're a songwriter. Working for you as a PA would teach me a lot. Meanwhile, I get to stay in the music industry."

Salinger gazed at me and hummed. I wondered what he was thinking.

"Anyway, it's not easy being an assistant. I still hope you'd take some time to think about it. It doesn't necessarily mean you'll end up as my assistant for sure. But after what I just said to that guy, the label might have second thoughts. If they're willing to give you the copyrights back or make some offer that's more acceptable to you than being my assistant, that's great too."

So it wasn't just about standing up to the bullies; he had really put himself in my shoes. I was both grateful and proud of my taste in choosing this guy to idolize in high school.

"Give me your phone."

I quickly handed him my phone. Salinger dialed a number on it, and his rang. I thought his ringtone would be a LOTUS song, but instead it was a series of *boom, boom, boom, boom* bass roots.

He handed my phone back to me. “Go home and think about it. Call me in three days.”

I knew in my heart Salinger’s reasons for helping me had something to do with his own experience. If there was nothing about me that resonated with him, even if I was his fan, it was enough for him to find me in the stairwell after the competition.

I didn’t know how the company was going to deal with this difficult celebrity bassist, but to my surprise, as Salinger had expected, the company called me the next day to say they were considering giving me two percent royalties—except the copyrights of my songs would remain with the company. They asked me if I would like to take this offer, and I did not accept it. I just wanted my copyrights back, but didn’t say so outright; only that I would consider it for a few days.

I was afraid that Salinger would go head-to-head with the company, since they wouldn’t even release the full rights for the seven songs to me at the original price. They could have offered me an outrageous price. If I had refused too decisively, I might’ve gotten Salinger in trouble.

Salinger gave me three days to think about it. I spent those three days learning about what personal assistants did from every source I could access. It was extremely tedious—they did everything, from taking care of the artists’ daily lives to helping them through their events and concerts. A PA had to follow the artist around all the time. It takes a meticulous person to note the various needs of an artist at all times, but on the other hand, it also meant that I’d have the chance to see Salinger behind the scenes. I’d even get to witness his entire songwriting process.

Nothing could bring me more exuberance and inspiration than being close to my idol. The desire to write fifty more songs and listen to ten more LOTUS concerts before going completely deaf seemed to have manifested before me in a different form as compensation, and if that was the case, why wouldn’t I take it?

I called Salinger three days later in the afternoon. The phone rang for a while before it was picked up. Salinger answered in a slightly nasal voice. He sounded like he’d been sleeping, but was quickly waking up. He didn’t bother to ask who was calling.

“Has the label approached you?”

I told him about the royalty rate the company had offered me.

“Two percent?” He was quiet for a while after hearing that. “Would you take it?”

Of course, I didn’t want to, but right now I was more concerned about whether the company had made things difficult for Salinger. “*Qianbei*, can I ask what they proposed to you? The initial buyout price was twenty grand for each song. If it’s too much above that…”

“I know.” Salinger said, “Chi Nan, do you not care about your cut? Do you just want these songs to belong to you?”

This was the second time I had heard my name come from his mouth. The first time he didn’t remember my name and had to look down at his file to check, but this time it was different. It gave me goosebumps in a weird way, both from the

thrill of having my idol call my name over the phone and from the surprise. I didn't know when he'd taken note of my name.

Thinking back on it later, it was funny that I wondered about that. He was going to buy the copyrights of my songs. All my songs were released under my real name, so it was obviously no surprise he remembered it.

It didn't matter how much royalty the company offered me, because I didn't know what the company would do with my songs in the future—who they would give them to, what they would do with them. Worst-case scenario was that the company was hoarding too many songs, and eventually they'd all end up being forgotten in the corner, covered in dust forever, with me no longer able to sing them myself. I knew I didn't have the resources or connections that the company had, but I was the one who wrote them. At least I would care more than the company, even if I just put it up on the website and let people pay to download it. If I were to run into a good partner someday, I could entrust my work to them without worries. But an irrevocable buyout was not something I was willing to accept one way or another.

"I just want my songs back." I said, "But the company probably won't even sell the copyrights."

"They're businessmen. They'll sell, and the price won't be so outrageous that you won't be able to afford it even as my assistant." Salinger sounded invincible, in control. "It's up to you."

He stopped talking, and I realized he was waiting for my response.

"I'm your fan. I'd be more than happy to be your assistant. That's no problem at all!" Really, it was an honor, a great honor. "It's just that…"

"Just what?"

"I've never worked as an assistant before, so please fire me if I don't do well. If you don't mind, the copyrights to these songs…"

"The copyrights will be mine." Salinger said, "The songs are good. I won't mind. Don't worry."

He told me to wait for his message. I thought it'd take at least a week, but to my surprise, I got a call from Salinger three days later asking me to come to the office. I wasn't sure how much he paid for the full rights to my songs; all I knew was that asking him would certainly not get me an answer.

"I had the head of the copyrights department draw it up. Check for any issues."

I turned to the last page. Salinger chuckled.

"Is this how you support your idols?"

I looked at his smiling face, and was baffled to find that he had dimples. As his fan, I really hadn't seen his smile much.

Sitting on the left side of the conference table, Salinger held his clasped hands under his chin and stared at me. "Do you just sign whatever your idol gives you even if it binds you to indentured servitude?"

I can't even remember how I reacted at the time. Did I blush, forcing a smile, or did I scratch my head? But it was embarrassing, being in my twenties and still acting like a Naruto-worshipping kid. When I signed the contract with the company,

even knowing that it was a standard contract with no room for negotiation, I still read it from the beginning to the end. The moment I stood in front of Salinger, my brain was no different from a firework explosion. I had to flip back to the front and skim through it with some seriousness.

"You don't get many idols in life. If I can't trust the idol I choose, I can't blame anyone else if I end up signing my life away."

With that statement, I salvaged my dignity and signed on the last page, since I couldn't focus on what was written anyway.

Salinger took the contract just as the door was thrown open. I turned around to see his assistant in tears. She looked at me with resentment and approached Salinger to question him.

"Why?"

Salinger signed the papers without looking up at her. "Are you going to postpone your graduation for another year?"

"What if I promise to graduate this year? Will you keep me on as your assistant?"

"No." Still not looking up.

She bit her lip and gazed at him. "How long does signing some papers take? 'Salinger' doesn't take that long to scribble. Can't you look at me and say something?"

Salinger put down his pen and looked up at her. "Sure."

One look from him and she deflated. "If you don't want to keep me on anymore, why won't you even say that to me yourself? I had to hear it from Xu Zhang-*ge* on my last day…"

Salinger said calmly, "It's only fair. Xu Zhang wouldn't let me know in advance who he picked as my assistant."

Sun Siyi took a deep breath. "*Ge*, are you dissatisfied with me?"

"Want me to tell the truth?"

She stared into his eyes, only to find Salinger meeting her gaze with extraordinary indifference. At last, Sun Siyi pursed her lips.

"No need.

"It's just…" She stared up at me. "Are you sure you want *him* as your assistant? Do you remember that Weibo post I showed you?"

My heart shattered. So Salinger had seen it already?

Salinger still looked at her with indifference, not saying a thing, which made me wonder what he was thinking.

"I knew you wouldn't remember." Sun Siyi sneered. "You don't care about anything shown to you. This guy was using you to promote his short film. He even tagged you on purpose. Anyway, if you're looking for someone as an assistant, hire anyone but him."

Salinger looked up. "Are you done?"

My heart was beating rapidly, but his tone was calm—except he was always

calm. I didn't know if he'd known this all along, or if he suddenly remembered and was just keeping calm on the surface. If that were the case, I'd submit to my fate. I could take this opportunity to apologize to him.

I started, "*Qianbei*, that post was-"

"Very obviously posted by the company," Salinger said to Sun Siyi. "You know I don't like to read those. Why did you show it to me specifically?"

"I'm your assistant. It was about you…"

"That was someone else trying to make it about me. What harm can it do to me if I didn't know? What good is it for me to know?"

"Fine, fine, fine, it's all my fault! Then let's keep you in the dark then, even if you'd been photographed on a date with someone else, or going in and out of a motel!"

That was clearly crossing the line. She was just throwing a tantrum now. I understood why Salinger had to let her go; he wasn't just worried about her putting off her studies.

Salinger fell silent. An aura of silence permeated the space around the three of us. Finally, he stood up.

"After you leave this building, don't concern yourself with my business anymore."

The chair made a scraping noise on the floor as Salinger stood up to leave the room.

Sun Siyi didn't wait for him to turn back. She turned to face the window. Knowing that me staying here would only upset her further, I left too. As I walked out the door, I heard sobs coming from the room.

I closed the door behind me. The corridor was empty. I didn't know where Salinger had gone.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Xu Zhang-*ge* later told me all of LOTUS's assistants were arranged by the company. I should have signed a contract with the company per protocol, but Salinger insisted on keeping it between us. After all, I became his assistant because he helped me buy my songs back.

Judging from the look on Xu Zhang's face, it seemed that he, too, had strong opinions but no control over what Salinger was doing.

"Both of his former assistants were very capable, but didn't manage their feelings well. I guessed that Salinger probably didn't want any more female assistants, I just didn't know he would do *that*…"

It seemed I had unintentionally become Salinger's accomplice again. He must not want Xu Zhang-*ge* to assign him assistants anymore. I didn't know whether this was because he didn't trust Xu Zhang's judgment or something else, but I felt honored to be his accomplice, or even a scapegoat for my idol. Of course, I couldn't express that in front of Xu Zhang-*ge.*

The fact that he said this to me now showed me he had something else he wanted to say. “Xu Zhang-*ge*, say what you have to say.”

He nodded. “Although you have a separate contract with Salinger, you still need to come to the company regularly for future work. You need to be familiar with the announcement process and all that.”

I answered, “Of course, anything else?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Chi Nan, to be honest, I think you’re a great musician, but working as an assistant may not be right for you…”

I was relieved to hear that.

“You’re right. I’ve never worked as an assistant before, and the worst thing I could think of is probably my hero hating me and firing me eventually. But he’s helped me so much already. If he trusts me enough to give me this job, I have to try my best before I can say whether it’s right or not.”

Xu Zhang gave me a complicated look.

“Don’t worry, Xu Zhang-*ge.* I’m not underestimating how hard this job can be.”

In fact, I knew it would be difficult. It wasn’t just how hard or tedious the work would be, what was hard was the mindset change from a “musician” to a “personal assistant.” Whether I could handle that or not would determine if I could truly commit to this job.

It took me a long time to get used to being a PA. This job is extremely irregular—when the artists work non-stop, so do their assistants; when the artists are on break, their assistants still have to be on call 24/7.

Each LOTUS member had their own assistant, and Alan’s assistant Liang Hai and I were the only male ones. Ji Shi, Stone and the leader Li Xiang all had female assistants. Ji Shi’s assistant was Xiaoxiao[15]; as her name implied, she was a petite, bubbly girl. She was the one who introduced me to everyone when I first met them.

“Come, come… I can see Hai’s eyes are glowing. Let me introduce you first. This is our best boy Hai-*ge*. Nan, be careful, Hai can’t resist boys with monolids.”

Liang Hai was a little older than us, and was the kind of guy with a very sophisticated style. I wasn’t surprised to find out he was gay—on the contrary, I was impressed by the fact that he made no attempt to hide it.

After a round of introductions, Li Xiang’s assistant Julie stared at me. “Nan, you’re so grounded. How can you be so calm in the face of Hai-*ge* in full slut mode?”

Hai-*ge* groaned. “Hey! That was pure appreciation, alright? You guys need to stop scaring him!”

I chuckled and said it was okay, that Hai-*ge* was quite good-looking, and this didn’t scare me. “It’s just that my monolids aren’t really monolids; my lids just fold on themselves. They may not meet Hai’s taste.”

I didn’t know what I said wrong, but I killed the mood.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Apart from the little awkward moment, I'm having a good time with the other four assistants. The first big event with LOTUS after becoming an assistant is the after-party of the outdoor reality show *Truth or Dare*, which happens to be on Valentine's Day.

I thought they'd all be used to this kind of event, but when we gather at the office to leave for the airport, it is a mess. I climb into the nanny car with my stuff to find that only Stone and Salinger are in the car; Ji Shi is stuck in traffic, and Li Xiang arrived at the airport first to wait for everyone because he lived closer. As for Alan, he overslept.

Stone is on the phone with Ji Shi. His assistant Lisa has gone upstairs to get the effects units he forgot. Salinger is resting, arms around himself. I hear Ji Shi through the phone; there's an accident ahead of him on the road and he can't get to the airport on time unless he gets Salinger to pick him up.

Stone growls. "Can't you just get Xiaoxiao to call you a motorbike? How can Salinger come pick you up? Not even one of his rumored girlfriends had ever sat on his Ducati!"

Salinger opens his eyes to glance at Stone, who asks cautiously, "None, right?"

Ji Shi actually gloats on the phone, "Really? Hahahaha, Handsome Sai, no wonder you couldn't make them last!"

I am left speechless. He seems to have completely forgotten that he is still stuck on the road and about to miss his flight—or maybe Mr. Vocalist of the Legendary Band is really so unbridled that he doesn't really care if he can catch his flight or not.

"Hey, hey? Are you sure you're not coming to pick me up? You know I have a problem with bikes. I feel safer if he comes!"

"Safer? Seriously? Is he Iron Man or what? How does he make you feel safe?"

Stone hangs up, but keeps looking through the window, mumbling, "Why is Lisa taking so long?"

With the anxious Stone on the one side and a steadfast Salinger on the other, I can't stay as calm as the driver. I feel myself splitting into two, so I turn back toward them and ask, "Why don't I go back and check? Maybe there's too much stuff for her to carry?"

Stone nods and agrees.

I move the bass case onto another seat and am on my way out when I hear Salinger telling Stone behind me, "Say thank you."

Stone turns to glare at Salinger, whose eyes are closed again, so he has to smile at me. "Thanks, Chi Nan!"

There is a saying on the internet that the hatred between each member of LOTUS is mutual. I only realize today that there is some truth in that.

When I get off the bus, I can hear Stone-*ge* moaning behind me, "A bunch of

veterans, not even as reliable as a newbie!"

To be honest, I feel the same way. Can you believe it? Salinger is the only reliable one in this band! Of course, this was a misconception—I only learned later that Salinger is the most terrifyingly unreliable one in the end.

I take the elevator up. When the doors open, I see Lisa limping toward me with something in her hand. I rush forward to take what she's holding.

"What happened to your foot?"

Cold sweat is dripping down from her forehead. "Slipped and sprained my ankle while I ran back."

"Can you still walk?"

Lisa grits her teeth and nods.

I think to myself that she obviously can't, but girls always seem to act this way—I guess they get embarrassed and don't want to cause others any trouble.

"Hold on a sec." I hand her the bag and squat. "I'll carry you down."

Lisa immediately tells me, "No need, Chi Nan-*ge*."

"Stone-*ge* asked me to come up and see if you could carry all this stuff. I can't just stand by and watch you go the whole way when you've sprained your ankle." The elevator has arrived at the car park by now, so I smile at her. "It's okay. It's just a few steps. Come on up."

Lisa whisper her thanks before clambering onto my back. As we walk out of the elevator and down the steps, she asks, "Chi Nan-*ge*, is this your first time carrying a girl?"

"Huh? No, why do you ask?"

"Nothing, just thought that was the case," Lisa says with a little chuckle in her tone. "Pretty stiff."

I cough. "Is your foot alright? Could it be dislocated?"

"It's fine. Just a sprain. A bit of rubbing and rest should get me going."

I nod sheepishly.

Not gonna lie, I am caught off-guard when she presses her chest against my back. I've been walking all this way, but I still can't ignore it because I've never really carried any girl before. When I was in high school, I carried a classmate to the infirmary who was suffering from heatstroke, but he was a boy. It wasn't that there weren't any girls that I wanted to carry, but I just didn't get that chance.

We can hear Stone's ranting from a mile away; he's so loud that not even the car windows can muffle the sound. Only this time, the target of his growls changes from Ji Shi to Alan. Salinger is, unsurprisingly, the first to spot us again. While Stone is still roaring, he lowers his head and gets out of the car. The driver quickly follows.

Only then does Stone look this way, surprised. "What happened?"

Salinger takes the bag from Lisa, then gets back in the car and throws it at Stone. "Your shit."

“Can you treat your bandmates half as well as you treat women?” Stone is annoyed.

Salinger bends to sit in the last row. “Given your attitude, I’ve been pretty kind to you.”

Voila, mutual hatred.

“Okay, fine! I’ve done you dirty. LOTUS has done you dirty!”

Stone turns to ask the driver to hurry up and drive. Salinger puts on his headphones, face expressionless—as if it wasn’t him who threw a tantrum, but Stone, and he’s used to that attitude.

We have another hour and a half before the plane is due to take off. I find Salinger asleep as the car drives down the flat airway—leaning back in the last row, head to one side, his pigeon gray turtleneck pulled up over his chin. His phone slips off his lap as the car takes a turn. I go back to pick it up. The album that was playing has a familiar name.

It is my first, and probably only, mini-album.

I hold the phone, stunned. I want to put it back, but notice Salinger’s eyes. Fully awake now, he looks at me, stretches out his hand, and thanks me.

I quickly put the phone in his hand.

Sitting back in my seat, I look at my reflection in the car window, my heart racing with excitement—all because he fell asleep listening to my song.

TRACK 05

THE whole crew makes it to the flight, and the plane arrives at one in the afternoon. Rehearsal starts at three, and the actual performance is at half seven. Time is pressing, so we have to eat in the car. Eating has always been a big challenge for the band, because everyone had different tastes.

I ask Salinger what he wants, so we can order. He is standing on the curbside with his shades on, watching an old gentleman play erhu[16] in the park. He is holding a cigarette in his hand, but it hasn't been smoked for a while so half has turned to ash. He doesn't notice it drop as he picks it up to puff on it.

He just says, "I'll have the same as you."

That is not helpful, so I have to turn to Xiaoxiao. "Is there anything that Salinger usually likes or avoids—like not too much spice or whatever?"

"Well, didn't you ask him?"

"I did, but I might as well not have," I say, resigned.

Xiaoxiao pats me gently. "*Ge*, don't worry about it. Our Salinger-*oppa* is the easiest to feed. He used to let Siyi pick whatever she liked when she was around. He's not a picky eater, unlike my boss here!" She scowls at Ji Shi, who is fiddling with his phone in the van. "He cares if it's *medium spicy* or *moderately spicy*, or *spicy-spicy*, or *super spicy*, oh my god! What's the difference between medium spicy and moderately spicy? What's the point of asking a hotpot place to reach French fine dining standards?"

Although Xiaoxiao is Ji Shi's assistant, she's long been Salinger's fan. She always has a lot to roast Ji Shi about. Whenever our group of assistants gathered, we'd often gossip or bitch about bosses, but we kept our mouths shut to outsiders and never tell anyone else shit.

Xiaoxiao always says that Ji Shi laughs at just about anything. When Ji Shi sees something funny on his phone and shows it to her, she would watch the whole thing without lifting a muscle on her face, all while Ji Shi would be laughing his ass off beside her.

Julie always says that Li Xiang simulates every occasion where he has to speak, so he can often be heard talking to himself, pretending someone is interviewing him. In the end, the reporters' questions are always different from what he prepares.

Lisa always tells us that Stone gets way too worked up about social issues. He used to repost everything he saw on Weibo, but there was just something about his luck—whatever he reposted would always turn out to be fake news. It always had a huge plot twist, flipping the whole story around faster than a tornado. It was a good thing that Stone seemed to have finally learned to use his private account and not the official one to share stuff, but the law of reversal still held.

Hai says that Alan is always over-interpreting things and always imitating Salinger, without any self-awareness. It was unbearable.

The band is on stage now to tune for the afternoon dress rehearsal. With nothing else to do, we stand by the still-empty audience seats and somehow get into another roast session. It starts off when Xiaoxiao invites everyone to watch an online variety show—there was a segment where the female guests were invited to talk

about their favorite male artists. One of the female guests, Tang Dan—who has a reputation for having a sharp tongue—said that she didn't like any of the cute boy idol types mentioned. Too much sunshine, she said. She liked the broody type.

The host added, "Tan Zhen's broody. Don't they call him Prince Brood?"

Tang Dan sneered. "You call that broody? Narrowing your eyes and sulking isn't brooding. Come on, does brooding not require some depth?"

The host laughed. "Aren't you afraid you'll offend people by saying that? Who would you say is broody and has depth?"

Tang Dan replied, "Is that a dare? Salinger from LOTUS."

There was a unanimous "Ooh" of recognition and agreement from the audience. Someone asked, "So why were there no LOTUS nominations? Salinger, Ji Shi, none of them? They're in their twenties. They're cute idols as well. Or does your show just discriminate against rock musicians?"

"Hey, be careful what you say." The host chuckled. "The nominees are all actors. When it comes to musicians, normally people focus on their music, not their faces."

"It's exactly because of their music that I like them," said Tang Dan, wiggling her fingers. "What's brood? It's not just about being cool. It's not about being classy. You have to be talented, right? If you're not talented, what right do you have to brood? You wouldn't even know what brooding is."

The post-production team threw in some canned applause there.

A male guest interjected, "I agree. Young girls like a dark prince, and Salinger fits the bill. But you're saying he has depth? Honestly, I don't understand what half his songs are about at all, like that one…"

He hummed the melody. The music department played the song alongside his humming. He gave a dramatic shrug.

"What the hell are the lyrics about? Isn't that just pretentious?"

That was followed by all sorts of comments and polemics about the lyrics. I couldn't stand it anymore, so I walk away to stop watching.

The song had been written for people suffering from depression, as mentioned by Salinger in LOTUS's anniversary video. Indeed, at first glance, the lyrics don't make sense, because they are a disconnected stream-of-consciousness and montage—but that is the world of depression patients, where even insignificant fragments of life, the blossoms and the falling of flowers, the glimpses, can make them feel hopeless. How could that guy make comments like that on a show when he didn't know anything?

"Chi Nan," Hai calls out to me. "Why do you look so serious all of a sudden?"

"Nothing, just thought the guy's ridiculous."

I look up at the stage where Alan is having a word with Salinger. Salinger turns to glance at him, raising his hands to do up the two buttons on Alan's collar and patting him on the chest to shoo the man away.

Soon after beginning my work as Salinger's assistant, I noticed Alan often approaches Salinger—but the inquiries are never about music. It was always about what to wear, how to do his hair, and so on. Once, he asked Salinger where he had

bought his coat when they were in the recording studio. Salinger was sitting next to the recordist, listening to the playback.

"From a shop," he said, and stopped talking to Alan.

I heard from Hai that Alan had long complained about Salinger because of this.

"Alan has had two assistants already, but for the opposite reason as Salinger—he was emotionally involved with both." Hai lowers his voice. "So the company wanted to find him a male assistant. Speaking of that, it's annoying. When they were recruiting assistants, Xu Zhang-*ge* asked me who I wanted to work for the most and asked me to rank my preferences. I listed Salinger as my first choice, and Ji Shi my second. But Alan, I definitely placed him at the bottom of the list!"

Xiaoxiao said, "Wasn't it exactly because of that that you were assigned to him?"

"Ugh, Xu Zhang-*ge* had too many tricks up his sleeves." Hai looks at the drummer on stage with regret. "See? He's looking in the mirror again!"

Xiaoxiao laughs, too. "Definitely learned it from my boss! The two of them can be in the same room for half an hour without saying a word, just looking in the mirror! No wonder they say LOTUS is the idol group of rock bands. Those two carry so much idol vanity! I've never seen Salinger-*oppa* check himself as much as those two do!"

Hai leans close to me and asks, "Does Salinger look in the mirror a lot in private?"

I think for a moment. "No."

Xiaoxiao says, "See? Truly handsome people look gorgeous with or without checking in the mirror!"

"But it could just be that I didn't catch it. He could have been hiding from people when he looked in the mirror…" I mumble.

I am nudged by the two of them from both sides as soon as I finish.

Hai blurts out, "No way!"

Xiaoxiao says, "Are you Salinger's assistant or not? How could you say that?"

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. *How strange. Didn't you guys shit on Ji Shi and Alan a second ago? I was just trying to blend in.*

The first song begins playing on stage. Tonight, they will sing a total of two songs. The assistants, who were just chit-chatting with gusto, all run off to stand offstage. Gossip is one thing, but when it comes time for the band to perform, we turn into a bunch of fangirls and fanboys. One of the major regrets of being an assistant is that you don't get to see them perform on stage, so the rehearsals cannot be missed.

Unfortunately, I can't enjoy it fully. The sound is too loud, so I have to wear noise-canceling headphones when the drummer starts the count in.

The earmuffs block most of the sound, but not the heavy bass. Just as the intro starts playing, I notice that the bass surprisingly comes in late. Salinger is half a beat too slow and tries to adapt, but the mistake is so clumsy; it's unlike him. The whole band stops and turns to him in astonishment. Salinger shakes his head.

I take off my headphones in wonder as I hear Stone shout, “Something wrong?”

Salinger waves and repeats, “Again.”

Ji Shi has already approached the mic excitedly. “Come on, let’s invite our Guitar Boy Stone to hit Handsome Sai on the head! To show that we are all treated the same!”

With that, he starts applauding and encourages us to do the same. The assistants don’t have the heart to clap, so Alan plays some drum beats to enliven the atmosphere.

Stone walks straight over and slaps Ji Shi on the back of his head, then says to Salinger, “Start over again. It’s a wonder when *you* can’t get the rhythm right…”

Alan points a drumstick at him. “Unreliable!”

Salinger calmly puts his in-ear monitors back on. “I could have adapted. Who told you to stop?”

Alan replies, “You dare talk back?!”

Ji Shi echoes, “Attitude!”

Stone agrees. “If you’re wrong, you’re wrong. What’s the point of talking back?”

Li Xiang is left speechless.

Honestly, I think they’re pushing it. There was no need for that; he hardly ever makes mistakes, and that was only one. But I did find it a bit funny.

The swarmed bassist bends to get a drink of water. He throws his head back as he takes a swig and stops talking.

Even watching him drink, Xiaoxiao can turn on her fangirl mode. “Salinger-*oppa* is so cool. He doesn’t even bother with them.”

Hai grins. “Really? How come I feel like he’s holding in his temper right now? All that coolness is a pretense. I feel like what he’s really thinking is ‘hmph, darling, I’m too good for y’all’!”

Hai’s imitation is adorable. It is in stark contrast with the cool bassist on stage, holding the bass in his right hand like he is carrying a gun. The obvious contrast makes me laugh, too.

Xiaoxiao sighs. “What a pity Siyi isn’t here. If she were, she would have punched you for sure.”

Hai rolls his eyes. “Yep, she can’t stand anyone talking shit about her Salinger-*oppa.* She’s more dedicated to protecting Salinger-*oppa* than her own boyfriend.”

“I don’t blame her. If I had to follow Salinger around every day, I would want to marry him, too.” Xiaoxiao replies, “But in our business, it’s important to remember your place. Me, when I first saw Ji Shi’s face? I fell into a teenage girl fantasy and got trapped there for a long time. It was a good thing my boss immediately disillusioned me.”

Hai taps me on the shoulder. “Chi Nan, you’re straight, right?”

My brain registers what he is asking. I nod.

“Got a girlfriend?”

I have to smile bitterly. “Not at the moment. Don’t have time.”

Hai leans over to me. “I would suggest you find one as soon as possible, in case you inadvertently turn gay for Salinger.”

The other three assistants giggle.

“No way, he and I are both straight,” I tell him.

I am sure about my own sexuality, and even more certain about Salinger’s. Although he seems to be the ideal type for many gay men, he’d only ever been rumored to be with female artists; even when he worked with gay singers or musicians, it was clear that he was not attracted to them at all.

As for me, I am undeniably straight, of course—but my first love was a long time ago.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

The event officially starts. LOTUS is the opening act, because we still have a night flight to catch. The weather has not been kind, and it starts to rain just as the concert begins.

As soon as LOTUS appears on stage, the audience immediately bursts into a frenzy. Ji Shi walks down the stage to pick up the mic. The drifting rain comes down in an even denser mist. Yet despite the long wait and the cold rain, the enthusiasm of the audience is ignited by this simple act of picking up the mic.

The first song is LOTUS’s debut masterpiece, “Freedom.” The song was written by Stone and composed by Salinger. The lyrics and the melody were already near perfection, but the arrangement took the “near” out of “near perfection.” Everyone knows this song; there’s always a huge sing-along every time there is a live concert, and this one is no exception.

With my headphones on, their voices sound like they are coming through a wall. I am tempted to smash through the bricks. This is just like the LOTUS concert I went to with my *xuejie*, where tens of thousands of people sang a song together. I felt like I was sucked into the gravitational field of LOTUS’s music; countless planets and stars revolved around them. Yes, even the most ordinary person would feel like a star at their concerts.

I met *xuejie* at a school festival. She was not an extraordinarily pretty girl—long-haired, bespectacled, petite. But when she bowed her head to play the guzheng[17], her fingers sweeping over the strings, somehow I was unable to move my eyes.

Back then, I was learning to play the guitar because I liked LOTUS. Naturally, I couldn’t afford an electric guitar, so I bought a 200 yuan acoustic one. Probably because we had common interests, it seemed natural that we got together. I tried very hard to act mature in the relationship, but after all, I was only 17. Thinking back on it, she probably thought my play-acting was funny, but she never called me out.

After graduation, she went to Austria to study music.

I called it a relationship, but we seemed to spend most of our time together talking about music or LOTUS. The only time we went on a date was to see a LOTUS concert. At the time, I thought she liked Ji Shi, because it seemed like all

the high school girls at the time liked Ji Shi. I remember buying her a bottle of Fubao Mineral Water and picking out the one with Ji Shi on the package—I went to the school mini mart to buy two bottles of water after a sports test. I unscrewed the one with Ji Shi's packaging and gave it to her, but she looked at the one in my hand.

"I'll take this one," she said.

It had Salinger on the packaging.

I still scroll through her Weibo account once in a while, but I know she doesn't update it anymore. The last post was from four years ago:

--Loving Stone's guitar makes me feel as if my soul would explode with it; loving Salinger's bass makes me feel as if the universe is spinning in silence.

I used to think it was just an ordinary concert review, but now, years later, I understood the adoration in the second sentence—we both loved the quietly spinning universe more than the exploding soul.

In hindsight, a girl who idolized Salinger would not really have fallen for the childish me. She just wanted to find someone who would listen to her and chase Salinger with her. I might have mistaken that for love, but I didn't regret knowing her. Without her, I wouldn't have noticed Salinger. Listening to music with cheap headphones at the time, I probably wouldn't even have realized what a miracle I was missing out on.

"It's pouring down!"

Xiaoxiao's voice pulls me back to reality, where the rain is drawing distinct lines on stage. We are ready with umbrellas backstage before LOTUS's set is over. Finally, the two songs are done, and the MC keeps the band onstage for a chat so the staff has time to move the instruments and ready the stage for the next set.

The rain stirs up a spray of water on the suspended cymbals. The MC and LOTUS are getting soaked. The crew is pretty much done getting the guitar and bass amps out, Li Xiang's keyboard has been sent down also. The drum kit is a bit trickier. Stone and Salinger still have their guitars and basses hanging off them.

While the MC is talking to Ji Shi, Salinger suddenly turns to look at me. I hurriedly give my umbrella to Hai and run onstage with the staff member carrying the drum kit, and I take the nearly drenched bass from him. Aside from him, Stone also hands me his guitar in a hurry. Surprisingly, he doesn't forget to say thank you.

When I get off the stage, Xiaoxiao is confused. "Why did you run up all of a sudden?"

I tell her, "Salinger told me to take it."

Hai blinks. "When?"

I freeze, stop polishing the bass, and stare down at the black custom bass hanging from my body that cost half a million. I remember when Salinger turned to look at me. The rain drenched his eyebrows. The stage was crowded with busy crew members, but his glance pierced me with perfect precision through the curtain of rain and the crowd. I thought to myself that must have been what he meant by that look. Even I felt sorry for such a pretty bass in all that rain.

Taking a dry towel to wipe all the instruments, I check the bass. It doesn't seem to have any water in it; Salinger must have been shielding it with his hands.

LOTUS get offstage with their hair and clothes wet. As they leave, I catch a snippet of Ji Shi and Xiaoxiao's bickering.

"Forget it. Give me the umbrella. I'll carry it for you. It's hard bending my neck like that!" Ji Shi is about to snatch the umbrella away.

Xiaoxiao moves the umbrella. "Not an option!" As she does so, the rain falls on Ji Shi's hair. A lock of his carefully-done hair falls, and Xiaoxiao hurriedly raises the umbrella again. "Sorry, boss, I can't let you carry the umbrella yourself. Xu Zhang-*ge* would scold me if he saw."

Ji Shi brushes his hair up. "Are you Xu Zhang's assistant or mine?" Saying that, he turns to look over at us. "Handsome Sai, I really envy you. Finally, you can walk around with your head up."

Salinger, who has been focusing on walking, hears him. He raises his eyes to his own umbrella. His eyes fall on me, then he raises his hand to hold the handle, nudging it in my direction. "This will do. We're about the same height. You don't have to hold it too far over."

There is still a height difference between him and me—ten centimeters, I guess. But it's the smallest among LOTUS, apart from Alan and Hai. A gust of wind blows the rain in our direction after Salinger lets go of his hand, so I lift the umbrella again. Salinger stops, looking at me in curiosity.

I shout over the noise coming from the direction of the stage, "The bass case is getting wet!"

Salinger turns to check his right shoulder. The black instrument bag he is carrying is now drenched in rain, as the aisle isn't wide enough and he has been carrying it on his right side. I have to stand over here and hold the umbrella for him. He switches his bass to his left shoulder, raises his eyebrows, and looks at me.

"Even though the case is waterproof, it says thank you."

"Then tell it I said you're welcome!" I tease.

Salinger grins.

Fireworks go off over the stage and golden sparkles drift toward us. It should have been a moment for all to see.

TRACK 06

EVEN though I am his assistant, I don't have the courage to interact with Salinger much. He is a quiet man; when the team is chattering together, he usually just sits alone in the corner of the couch playing with his phone. If they are outdoors, he usually walks away to smoke. Xu Zhang reminds him not to be caught on camera by the paparazzi when he does so, which Salinger finds strange.

"I'm smoking, not using drugs. Who cares if I'm caught?"

Xu Zhang chokes on his words. "There are strict regulations these days. Smoking isn't even allowed on TV. LOTUS has barely managed to keep such a positive PR image as a rock band; even Stone knows to smoke in the restroom."

In a rare display of obedience, Salinger puts down his cigarette, even putting out the half-smoked butt. "I see, but wouldn't it be more difficult to explain if you go to the restroom to smoke and get caught on camera?"

He says this calmly, but with contempt. Xu Zhang freezes, his expression saying, *"Damn, that's true."*

When Salinger goes back to his room, Xu Zhang makes a "keep an eye on him" gesture at me, which of course I pretend not to see.

Sorry, Xu Zhang-ge. *You may as well not count on me; I can only be on Salinger's side. If he smokes, I'm the one who has to go buy him his cigarettes. What else can I do?*

Salinger isn't the only one who smokes in LOTUS—Stone and Li Xiang are also chronic smokers. When it comes to nicotine addiction, Stone smokes the most, followed by Salinger, then Li Xiang.

Allegedly, these three had an incident over their smoking. Once, they were discussing song arrangements in their band room and all three were smoking at the same time. Eventually, the smoke got so bad that they set off the fire alarm. Ji Shi and Alan were an hour late, arriving just in time to see the three break out of the smoky chamber, the sprinkler pouring water everywhere. Apparently, Ji Shi laughed his head off. When the water stopped later, Ji Shi pushed the door open to see the ashtray knocked over.

He pointed to the pile of cigarette butts and asked, "How did you guys manage to compose a song in this environment?"

None of the culprits said anything. Alan said he had never seen a band in such a mess; he couldn't believe he was part of them. For a while, Ji Shi and Alan were telling everyone about this. Eventually everyone in Yitian Entertainment, from artists to staff, knew about it. Inevitably, I was told the story three months after I became an assistant.

Hai said that, at first, Alan was going to learn to smoke. Alan was two years younger than Stone, Salinger and Ji Shi, and three years younger than Li Xiang, leaving him the youngest in the band. When he first joined, he wanted to be like Salinger in everything, including smoking, because he thought it was cool to be able to play mobile games with a cigarette in one hand like Salinger did.

There's a video on the internet that shows someone playing a mobile game; Xiaoxiao said it was captured by Salinger's first assistant. I also saw that video. A

company developed an instrument simulation game that became super popular because it was realistic enough for you to pluck the bass. The video was only about thirty seconds long, no shots of Salinger's face, just his hands. He finished an impromptu slap on the touch screen. He was so satisfied with his own playing that he shook his phone a bit at the end. Next to him a male voice said it sounded nice, but the voice was unclear—now I could guess it might have been Alan. The video went viral on social media, because the impromptu slap was so good. It was done on a touch screen with just his left hand, no less; the right hand didn't even let go of the cigarette. He only used his thumb to press the strings. Even 'til this day, very few people know the gamer in the video was Salinger.

The more you admire someone, the more it hurts once reality hits you. After the fire alarm incident, Alan completely put away the idea of smoking. He thought it was just too moronic.

Xiaoxiao argues that Salinger is still attractive no matter what. She wonders how bad Salinger looked that day, that even Alan got disillusioned.

Hai asks me, "Is it true that you musicians all like to smoke? That you can't get inspiration without smoking? Do you smoke?"

I say, not necessarily. Inspiration can come if you just try hard enough. The truth is that I've refrained from smoking to protect my voice, but it is pointless to mention this now. It is not uncommon for an entire rock band to be smokers, but it depends on the genre—after all, not all songs can be managed with a smoky voice, so at least the vocalist must keep it under control. I remember Wendy telling me that Salinger's voice used to be different from what it is now. I wonder how long he's been smoking.

"Really?" Hai scoots over, interrupting my thoughts. "Why do I smell tobacco on you?"

"Come on, are you a drug-sniffing dog?" Xiaoxiao remarks. "Even if he has the smell of smoke on him, it must be Salinger's."

I raise my arm to smell it after getting into the car, but I can't really smell the tobacco. Salinger smokes black Davidoff, which has a very light smell compared to Stone's *Zhongnanhai*.

Today, they're scheduled to shoot advertising photos and product packaging photos for Fubao Spring Water. When we arrive at the studio, we are told that the previous group of celebrities were late for a fashion shoot, so the shooting is not finished yet. The photographer's assistant estimates that they will take another hour to wrap up. Since LOTUS has no other scheduled tasks that day, we decide to go to the gaming hall downstairs to pass some time.

Hai drags me along to play *Taiko no Tatsujin*, a game I have only played once with my classmates two years ago. At first the drums are slow, and I have trouble finding my beat. Xiaoxiao and Lisa are behind me, rooting for me. I somehow get really motivated to win, staring at the red and blue drums, trying to get the hang of it.

The drumbeats come thick and fast. After a bit of legato, I feel like I have no problem getting the rhythm of the song. I finish the last hit when I hear the applause behind me. The final score is 270,000, so high that even I am astonished.

Hai says, “Gosh, it’s the first time I’ve met someone who missed so much in the beginning, yet still managed to get almost 300,000 points!”

I figure that since the drums were slow in the beginning, even if I missed some, I could easily catch up afterwards. The drumming machine is surrounded by many people watching. Hai doesn’t want to give up on winning, so he calls for Alan, who rolls up his sleeves and goes to the machine.

“It’s alright, dear subject. This emperor shall avenge you!”

Alan is wearing a cap and shades so no one around me can recognize him. Xiaoxiao and Lisa don’t dare to support me out loud, so instead they give me a sneaky thumbs-up. That’s how I’m here, standing in front of a game of *Taiko no Tatsujin* with the top drummer in the music industry today, eager to give it a go.

The second song is the theme song to an anime that just happens to be rock. We all know it well. Unsurprisingly, Alan is good at what he does. I probably only miss two or three beats, but he doesn’t miss a single one. His hit count is higher than mine, so he easily scores a high 600,000 on such a difficult track.

Hai is shouting from the sidelines, “You’re incredible, Your Majesty!”

Alan warns him, “Don’t fall in love with me!”

Remarks of admiration from the people watching accompany our game. Though I lost in the end, it is exciting to think that not just anyone has the opportunity to compete with the LOTUS drummer in *Taiko no Tatsujin.* The top band’s drummer lives up to his reputation. I am happily defeated when I recall that Alan’s drumming was first taught by Salinger.

Xiaoxiao’s voice comes from behind me. “Chi Nan, I found someone to avenge you!”

For a split second, my heart stops dead in its tracks. I look back to see Salinger in his black racer’s jacket standing behind the crowd of people gathering around us.

Salinger is wearing sunglasses that obscure his face, but at 6'1” he stands out from the crowd. For a moment, it feels as if the heated atmosphere surrounding us gets suppressed by him.

Alan points at Xiaoxiao, saying, “Sneaky! You got reinforcements!”

I have handed over my drumsticks already. I can’t wait.

Salinger steps over to take them from me, pulling down his sunglasses slightly to make it easier to see the screen, then turns to Alan. “You have the decency to compete with someone on *Taiko no Tatsujin* as a drummer. Come on, Bass is gonna play with you.”

He said “Bass,” so no one in the room suspected anything.

“Come on!” Alan twirls his drumsticks. “What do you say if you lose?”

Salinger answers, “I’ll call you daddy if I lose. You do the same if you lose.”

Excited, the spectators start to whistle.

Alan says, “You said that. You better do it!”

The drums are beating in unison. The sounds spread all over the game hall, and the drumming machine is soon surrounded by a big crowd. This time the song is more difficult; fast with plenty of shifts. Alan is committed. His habit is to move his whole body with the rhythm, while Salinger, on the other hand, does not move his body at all except for the fast and regular tapping of his hands on the drums.

Someone behind me whispers, “He’s so calm it’s kinda freaky.”

The game is littered with the upbeat chimes of “combo” notifications. The scores are tight at first, but by halfway Salinger is steadily leading. Alan doesn’t miss a beat. The difference is that Alan is barely hitting some of them so the game gives him “OK” scores, while Salinger is popping “Excellent” the whole time—not a single “Miss” or “OK.” By the end of the game, we are surrounded by “Shit,” “That's awesome” and gasps.

There is a tsunami of applause and roars of approval in the game hall at that last hit, as Salinger takes 800,000 points straight from the five-star track on hard mode—an almost inhuman achievement without practicing ahead of time.

Xiaoxiao gets so excited that she can hardly keep it to herself. “Sa-” she starts off, but changes her words in the middle of screaming, “Saiko!”

Alan is unconvinced. “Again!”

Salinger puts his drumsticks away and pushes his shades up. “I’m done.”

“You win and run every time!”

Salinger steps out of the crowd. “I don't run when I lose.”

Hai reminds Alan, “You haven’t called him daddy yet.”

Alan flushes. “Who was I avenging? You traitor!”

When the studio calls, Ji Shi is in full swing at the claw machine. He has already caught two large packs of plushies and still won’t stop.

“That’s enough!” Stone urges him, “You’ve caught so many. Do you want to get them all or what?”

Ji Shi is still focused on the machine. “Those are not the ones that I want. I’ll go with you when I get that Minion!”

Stone, who originally came to get him, at some point threw himself into the game. “Hey, hey, you can get it, get it now…oops, too far, I told you!”

Xiaoxiao is running around buying coins, rolling her eyes at Ji Shi every time she throws them into his stretching hand. Ji Shi’s full attention is on the claw, not seeing a single eye roll from her. After getting countless other plushies as well as countless nothing, he finally gets that priceless Minion.

Li Xiang is smiling from behind the crowd. “Happy as a child.”

Stone chuckles. “The stupid kind.”

Ji Shi has caught two large bags of plushies. The band members and assistants are given one each. Only Salinger is holding his plushie with an indifferent face—it is a Crayon Shin-chan doll, wearing scanty boxers with an indescribable elephant trunk in the middle.

Holding up the plushie, Salinger glares at Ji Shi, his eyes saying *"What the hell is this?"*

Xiaoxiao says, "It's Crayon Shin-chan."

Alan laughs. "How come you don't even recognize Crayon Shin-chan? You of all people should know him!"

Salinger frowns as he lifts the doll. "Why do they make toys like this? What would parents say if a little girl got one of these and asked them why it had an elephant trunk?"

"The company even made a doll of you when we first started," Alan is still arguing. "If you can be made into a stuffed toy, why not Crayon Shin-chan? He can't beat you in the gutter!"

Stone says, "Be reasonable. Salinger-*oppa*'s toy doesn't wear these elephant trunk boxers, okay?"

Even Xiaoxiao and Hai are laughing. And they claim to be Salinger fans! I don't know what to do with them.

Alan shakes his head in wonder. "Salinger, Salinger, I really don't get you. Is your mind too filthy or too innocent?"

"What's so hard to get?" Stone scoffs. "He's the kind of guy who goes to hell for other people. 'Come at me with all the filth in the world and leave their innocence alone'!"

Salinger glances up at Stone, then back at a smug Alan. "I don't care what Stone says. But who taught you, Alan, to speak to your father like that?"

Alan's face flushes burnt red. He glares at Salinger, tongue-tied. When he tries to speak, Salinger looks at him askance, as if to say, *"Anything else you want to say to daddy?"*

Alan throws him an "Okay, fine" look and shuts his mouth in defeat.

Crayon Shin-chan sits on Salinger's lap, his trunk still sticking out. I catch Salinger staring at it, wishing he could just cut it off. But if he were to cut it right off, ouch…

Stone thinks the Hello Kitty he gets is too girly, and wants to swap it for Ji Shi's Minion. Ji Shi refuses.

"It's a gift for someone else." Ji Shi pets the Minion.

Stone asks keenly, "Who's it for?"

Ji Shi gives him a blank look. "Someone you don't know. What do you care?!"

Salinger plays with the Crayon Shin-chan doll in his hand. He asks casually, "Do I know this someone?"

Ji Shi's head jerks toward Salinger.

Salinger ponders the Minion. "The one who's a bit shorter than you and has a bit of an artist vibe when not talking?"

Ji Shi gapes and we follow suit. How could he tell this from a Minion?

Stone quickly comes over to sit next to him. "Who is it, who?"

Salinger stands up. “Stay away from me. I’m afraid I’ll defile you.”

That shuts Stone up.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

They finally go into the studio to shoot. As an assistant, I have nothing to do, so I listen to the songs and transcribe the music score in the lounge next door. The habit of transcribing music started when I was in music school. I was also in a band for a short time back in those days.

Every time LOTUS released a new song, the guys in the band would excitedly transcribe the music score, put together a band cover and upload it to a video site. Unfortunately, the band split up within a year and we all went our separate ways. I was the only one still on the music path.

The new LOTUS B-side single “Nibelungen” is a very typical Salinger song, with a bit of an eerie and magical vibe. But the arrangement is epic; the electric guitars switching between several sounds with ease, overlapping like a swarm of demons emerging. The bass line is completely detached from the rhythmic roots, yet there is almost no melodic line to follow. So many notes slide by. All you can hear is the coda that goes off as if it has derailed, like a ghostly dream, a phantom gasping, full of unpredictable and eerie beauty. It is the kind of tune that anyone learning to play an instrument, any rock musician, will be itching to play.

I go to the restroom halfway, only to see Salinger already back from the shoot when I get back.

He is sitting at a small round table in the lounge. The floor-to-ceiling window behind him lets in blinding sunlight that turns his hair into a light chestnut shade. He is still wearing the clothes he was wearing for the shoot—a white crew-neck sweater provided by the sponsor and a small dark green shirt with the collar turned up. To fit Fu Bao’s “fresh and pure” brand identity, even Salinger has to put on a “fresh and warm” look, but it doesn’t look out of place.

When LOTUS first started out, they were not allowed to decide how to dress themselves. Back then Salinger was often seen in warm-colored shirts and sweaters for CD covers and music videos. The stylists probably thought he was a pure and gentle person at heart. But these days, Salinger is often seen in black jackets, black windbreakers and black coats, swimming in rumored romances. I wonder how his former stylists feel about it.

With my music sheets in his hand, Salinger looks up. “Transcribing the bass lines?”

“Ah yes,” I said. “Wanted to cover it.”

I expect him to give me back my score, as it is only half-finished. It would be a shame if he finds out I’ve done it wrong, even though I was actually quite confident before. Instead, Salinger lowers his head as if he doesn’t see me.

He asks, “You play bass?”

“I learned both guitar and bass.” I feel a bit dejected saying that. *I’m a huge fan of yours. How can I not?*

He is puzzled. “Why didn’t you ask me for the score?”

To be honest, I was too embarrassed to ask for it. I pretend to be braver than I am. “I wanted to practice my listening while I’m at it.”

Salinger finally gives it back to me. “You have pretty good ears.”

Two days later, I finally finished the bass line transcription of “Nibelungen,” so I play it, record it, and upload it to the website which I registered under the name of the band I was in at music school. I am the only one who can log in to upload videos now. There are not many listeners left who followed our cover videos. I don’t know why I continue to play LOTUS songs and record videos, even though I don’t even get a single comment these days.

It's just that every time I pick up a bass and type “LOTUS cover” in the video introduction, I am always vaguely reminded of the enthusiasm I felt back then. Some things you do for so long, once you stop, you might never pick it back up again. Every time I cover LOTUS, I’d think it might be the last time. This feeling is stronger now than ever.

I am not the only one covering “Nibelungen.” There have been quite a few guitar and bass covers before me, yet the next morning I turn on my phone to find that my account has blown up with message alerts. The video received half a million views overnight!

I even spot former bandmates in the comments section:

--Jesus Christ!!! Nan, I knew you had the best bass! Even the man himself gave you a like! Reminds me of the days when we used to play in a band. Damn I want to go back!!!

I stared at the message from “Xiao Xuan.” I am so excited I want to reply right away so I click on the reply box. Only then do I see the word “the man himself”!

The man himself? Salinger?!

I scroll through Salinger’s Weibo profile. Indeed, he had shared the video with a comment, “The picking blew me away.”

Then came the usual frantic comments from fans:

--I’m blown away by you!

--I’m blown away by you being blown away!

--I’m blown away by the way you post!

I watch the cover video again from the start. I didn’t even show my face in the video; only the bass is in the footage. There is no way Salinger could have known it was me. Even if he knew I was transcribing the score, there are so many cover videos on this site, with so many good players, he couldn’t have known which one was me.

I am full of questions, so on impulse I dial his number—only to remember that he must still be asleep at this early hour and hang up in a hurry. To my surprise, Salinger calls me back a little later.

“What's wrong, calling me so early?”

“Nothing, Lin Sai-*ge*. Just go back to sleep. I dialed the wrong number!”

“So who were you so excited to be calling that you dialed the wrong number?”

I think to myself that if he could see right through Ji Shi with just a doll, I'd better not test his psychic senses.

"No," I reply. "It was no mistake, but it's not a big deal. You're sleeping now, aren't you? Then…"

Salinger still hasn't said anything. I think he's probably leaning on the bed, wide awake, listening to my ramblings. I can't stand myself. *Why can't I just get to the point? Man up!*

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I take two deep breaths to calm down. "Lin Sai-*ge*, did you share a cover video of 'Nibelungen'?"

He says yes, then asks calmly, "So the bassist was you?"

I confirm it as I stare up at the ceiling, still in disbelief. "That's too much of a coincidence!"

Salinger chuckles. "You think it's a coincidence?"

When he says that, I become even more curious. "How come you suddenly shared that cover video?"

"I used to cover other people's work when I was playing in bands. You said you were transcribing the score the other day, so I thought I'd have a look up there." Salinger says. "'Nibelungen' is difficult to transcribe, I actually felt…complicated when I saw you cover it that way."

He doesn't say "happy." He doesn't say "surprised." What does "complicated" mean? It is as if the signal has been transmitted, only to turn into static at the most crucial point.

"Maybe I'm just too familiar with your songwriting," I reply. "Lin Sai-*ge*, did you know it was me when you shared it?"

"No, I just wanted to bet," Salinger says. "I knew I'd won when you called."

There is a hint of pleasure in his "I knew I'd won"—the pleasure of having won a real bet, also the confidence that "I won't lose." Like a kid standing at the crossroads where cars are racing by, counting down to the hundredth car, knowing it would be a red Ferrari, even though no one believes him. But he knew the Ferrari was on its way, that they had promised it would be there by the hundredth car. It won't let him down.

Although this bet never existed, I am glad to be that Ferrari in his mind.

"There's one part you played differently." Salinger suddenly asks, "Why did you change the bass line?"

The altered part was in the guitar solo. I just felt the bass should have been more expressive there, but it only did the bare minimum of groundwork. That segment was like a missing piece of the puzzle, and I tried to fill it out a bit more. But how can you say something like that to Salinger?

"That guitar solo was great, I just wanted the bass to show off a bit as well. It might not be very appropriate," I answer.

"It wasn't inappropriate," Salinger interrupts me. "It was very appropriate."

He stops talking after that, as if lost in thought, offering no explanation for his statement—much less why the bass line was written that way in the first place. If he did, it would get awkward, so I change the subject.

"Lin Sai-*ge*, Ms. Zhang won't be coming over today; do you have food in your fridge? How about I bring you some? What do you fancy?"

"Just bring me something good."

What a typical Salinger answer!

"Okay!" I quickly pull on my pants. "I'll be there in an hour!"

Only later do I learn the reason for the missing bass part is that there has been an original arrangement of "Nibelungen" that's different from the one used in the official single release. When I find the first draft of that arrangement in Salinger's workshop much later, I wonder if I had seen the score at some point.

Salinger never tells me that first draft ever existed, nor do I ever tell him that I actually know all about it, and how flattered I am for this miracle.

I think it is a beautiful secret that both he, the icon, and I, the fan, instinctively know we are willing to share and keep from one another.

Just three months after its finale at the beginning of May, *Truth or Dare* is back for a new season. *Truth or Dare* has been running for three years, yet the ratings have been declining season by season, but it's able to keep recording because each season's opening and closing episodes feature LOTUS as guests. Those episodes all hit concurrent rating peaks. LOTUS rarely does TV shows; apart from their exceptionally high commission charges, the band is also very selective in the shows they attend, usually only choosing music-related shows or interview shows with A-list hosts. They did only one entertainment show, *Truth or Dare*, because of Xu Zhang's close relationship with the producer. So it is not easy for fans to see them on TV. Many people on the internet even tease that as long as LOTUS continues to be on *Truth or Dare*, the show will survive for another 100 years.

The first episode of the new season will be recorded in Daxi City. Even though the announcement has not been posted on the LOTUS website, there are already a large number of well-informed fans and press waiting at the airport.

LOTUS's arrival is met with screams. It's a good thing there aren't too many fans there; the crowd is kept in line by security guards, but there are still excited fans with arms outstretched trying to pass gifts to their idols. Ji Shi is the worst hit—once he takes one gift, he can't push away others that are handed to him. Soon, Xiaoxiao has both her hands full, and even Ji Shi is carrying a huge custom-made doll in his arms.

Just then, a booming male voice pops out of the fangirls' screams, "Salinger, I love you!"

This sound acts like a spark. The fangirls explode into a frenzy, all screaming Salinger's name. I look over to see a young boy carrying a guitar behind two rows of excited fangirls, his head held high, hoping his idol will glance in his direction.

Such a familiar scene. It is like seeing myself back in high school.

LOTUS has only been to Hengzhou once. Before I became a fan of LOTUS, I always thought I would never do celebrity airport pickups, but when I used to hear

that they were coming, the thought of seeing them up close instead of through a cold CD made me skip my extra tutoring on Saturday and stay up the whole night. I finally understood how the fans waiting at the airport for their idol felt. They already crossed thousands of miles, and we only had to bear the last ten miles to complete this rendezvous with them—what a romantic idea, why not?

That day, my *xuejie* and I met many other young fans on the metro with banners and gifts ready, their faces full of excitement, some from fan clubs and some alone like us.

The long, white carriages, for the first time, seemed less crowded and depressing. The train weaved through dark tunnels, and yet it sparkled.

At the time, Salinger was a little younger than I am now, I guess. He was still at the age where he liked to wear baseball shirts. That day, we took a picture from afar, holding our phones up through the crowd. In early summer, he was wearing a blue and white long-sleeved baseball T-shirt, jeans, and a white baseball cap that he liked. He was still not used to wearing sunglasses. If he wasn't surrounded by so many fans shouting his name, if he didn't have that bass bag on his back, he'd look just like some handsome college boy from next door.

That picture was all that was left of that day.

I did scream his name. Although I didn't shout out "I love you," the words were in my heart.

Someone stepped on *xuejie*'s feet in the crowd's pushing and shoving. Probably supported by the presence of her idol, she acted completely unaffected until her ankle started aching later. That was when I mustered the courage to say, "Let me carry you to the station," but she smiled and refused. She called someone to pick her up. It was then that I realized she could have asked her driver to drive her to the airport, but instead she agreed to meet me at the metro station.

I was surprised I didn't feel particularly dejected when the courage I had built up because of my idol went out of the window. I felt that, because I'd met him, that day was already perfect enough to go down in history.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

When I first started working as an assistant, Salinger told me I should not accept any gifts from fans at the airport. From a fan's perspective, it seemed a bit insensitive, but I am his assistant and his request always comes first. I didn't need to ask why.

I agreed, but Salinger turned to look at me instead. In the end he didn't say anything, just hummed.

Most of Salinger's fans don't insist on passing him gifts anymore, but there are always surprises. The scream is accompanied by a hardcover that looks like a souvenir album, which is accidentally slapped to the ground as his bodyguard raises his hand to stop the fan. There's a very dull *thud*. Screams rise from all around and almost no one in the crew notices, except the bassist with a sensitive ear for low notes.

When Salinger looks over at the sound, the book has been kicked several times in the chaos. He walks over, raising his hand to block the bodyguard's arm, then bends

to pick it up and turns to hand it to me.

This becomes the first gift Salinger receives from a fan. But he soon regrets it, because fans start throwing a flood of gifts at his feet at the airport. Unable to stand it any longer, Salinger posts online, “If you don’t care what’s thrown on the ground, I won’t care any more than you do.”

At lightning speed, the post becomes trending on Weibo. Alan asks him incredulously, “You’re really not afraid of offending your fans, are you?”

Salinger, playing with his phone, says, “They weren’t afraid to offend me when they threw grenades at me.”

Even Li Xiang can’t help but suggest, “You can be a bit gentler in your tone. It hurts the fans to be so mean all the time. After all, they are girls.”

Salinger says, “Who would take me seriously if I’m not mean?”

Alan scoffs. “I guess so. You’ve been so mean ever since you were a kid. You must have been the king of the playground at school. Even the headmaster wouldn’t dare to mess with you!”

Just then, Ji Shi interjects, “Hey, are you guys free tonight? Want to go out for dinner together?”

Alan wonders, “How come you’re thinking about dinner already? You just had lunch!”

I chime in, “The company lunch doesn’t seem to be very filling.”

Alan is successfully sidetracked by me. “Yes, the company meals are exceptionally modest. Our company has always been stingy!”

Stone suggests, “Let’s go out for a nice dinner tonight.”

Everyone starts discussing where to go for dinner. I glance back at Salinger. He is sitting on the couch, tucking his phone away as he stands up, lights up a cigarette, and goes out.

I think that maybe Alan is telling the truth, because Ji Shi and Stone have allegedly known Salinger since high school. Maybe neither of them actually want to get dinner together. Maybe Salinger really did grow up mean, but then I think I might be overthinking it—Salinger graduated from Berklee College of Music, so his family should be pretty well off; unlike me, who could never afford to go to a school like that.

There was no reason for him to be mean as a kid, was there?

The first episode of *Truth or Dare* will be recorded in a valley outside of the city with five other female celebrities, including a popular TV star, a model and a singer. They are teaming up with LOTUS to play a game.

Salinger is teamed up with the popular TV actor, Ren Meilun, who is a hot shot currently. There is a part where the guests are asked to work in pairs to make a raft. To make the show interesting, the raft is designed to be so small that the two people have to stay close to each other, but even if they are huddled together, the raft will still leak. The weather isn’t great; it rained the day before. Ren Meilun is shivering from the freezing stream as she drifts. Halfway through the trip, Salinger, who is in second place, docks his raft.

The assistants are supposed to follow the director's car, but the rain has blocked the road so the cars can't cross for a while. I get out to walk, and arrive at the creek as Ren Meilun is being taken ashore by the filming crew in the kayak, followed by Salinger, both soaked to the skin. I hand over dry towels and pour out two more cups of hot water. When I take it to Salinger, he hands it directly to Ren Meilun. The other cup of water he hands to the cameraman, then he blocks the camera with his hand.

"She's feeling unwell. Just stop filming for now."

The cameraman, who is drinking the water, cooperates and turns off the camera.

"How come you're the only one here? Where's Ren Meilun's assistant?" Salinger asks.

"The car is still behind us. The mountain road is a little hard for the girls to walk, so I came over first. They might not be able to come for a while."

Salinger looks down at the hem of my pants, then back up at me. "Just 'a bit'? I don't think so."

Ren Meilun sits on the rocks, wet clothes plastered to her body, holding the cup of hot water, shivering the whole time. Salinger looks back at her before unzipping his jacket. Inside is a black turtleneck sweater that should have been dry with body heat. I hurriedly take off my own jacket and pass it to Ren Meilun before he can.

Salinger turns to look at me, pauses, then says to Ren Meilun, "Let's get you into some dry clothes. Your assistant's gonna be a while."

Then he presses the cameraman and me by the back so we all turn around.

We don't turn around until Ren Meilun says okay. The crew member in charge of the boom mic calls the directing team, who says that the car can't get through and we should head back. With that, he goes down to help Ren Meilun up, at which point Salinger calls out to him.

"You go ahead with them. I'll take care of her."

The man looks as if he just got hold of some juicy gossip. Salinger doesn't care what the other man is making up in his head as he takes off his right glove—he was wearing gloves to protect his hands, as he needed to paddle while rafting—and offers his hand to Ren Meilun. She grabs his hand, bows her head, and says thank you as she is pulled from the bottom of the steep slope.

The male staff member didn't even warn Ren Meilun when he was trying to pull her up just then. She was caught off-guard and almost knocked her knee on a rock. That was why Salinger said he would take care of her. At that moment, he didn't and couldn't have had any other motive at all, but I've more or less figured out how that gossip about him got started.

I carry the backpack while I wait for them to come up. The three of us start heading back down the muddy path. The crew is ahead of us by some distance, as we don't pick up the pace. Ren Meilun is walking slowly. Although she is an actress, Ren Meilun is unexpectedly shy in private, so Salinger doesn't talk to her much on the way, only helping her out when necessary. Nevertheless, she finds the courage to talk to him.

“I’m terribly sorry. If it hadn’t been for me docking halfway through, you would have gotten second place.”

Salinger stays half an arm’s length in front of her. “It wasn’t first, so it doesn’t matter if I get it or not.”

“Do you really want to get first place?” Ren Meilun’s tone gets even more apologetic. “I’m really bad at all this outdoor survival stuff. If you were teamed up with someone else, you would have come first.”

“That someone else could’ve been worse.” Salinger says, “Normally at this point, aren’t you supposed to say you’ve gone to LOTUS concerts, then I’ll say I’ve seen your TV show as well?”

Ren Meilun smiles. “I really *have* been to your concerts.”

Salinger follows up, “Then I’ll watch your TV show later.”

Ren Meil u n doesn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. “You haven’t watched it?!”

“I will.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if Ren Meil u n is now looking at Salinger with affection in her eyes. I’d be melting, too; a man so reticent and considerate at the same time.

“Chi Nan.” Salinger suddenly turns to me. “Is the backpack heavy?”

“It’s fine.” I smile, shaking my head. “It’s nothing compared to my school days.”

Salinger stares at me for a moment. “You keep walking behind without making a sound. I wouldn’t know if you fell.”

“That won’t happen.” I lift the hiking bag on my shoulder. “There’ll be a heavy bass sound if I fall.” *Anyone else could miss it, but you couldn’t.*

Salinger smiles, and so does Ren Meilun. I don’t think she’s smiling because she heard my answer; she smiles because she sees Salinger smiling. She’s not the kind of girl who would be easily attracted to Salinger’s looks, as she works with all the good-looking young artists, but a smile like that is a rare sight on Salinger’s face.

I thought they would only meet this once, but I guess I’m too naive. Salinger ends up going out with Ren Meilun after that show. It’s hard not to know that when you’re his assistant.

I don’t get him. I thought he was a guy who lived in his own musical world; simple and easy to understand. But when it comes to romantic relationships, he is confusing, not at all simple.

I know that Salinger had dinner with Ren Meilun twice. Whether there was any further contact I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. But Xu Zhang-*ge*’s instincts are way better than mine. I’ve been afraid of bumping into him at work and being interrogated, but somehow I always run into him.

“What’s Salinger up to? He didn’t even come to company gatherings?”

I tell him, “Probably busy writing songs; he doesn't really like to have dinner with the company executives.”

“Chi Nan, you know he's a guy with a lot of problems, right? Make sure you tell me if there's anything.”

I agree without meaning to. I can’t possibly interfere or spy on Salinger’s private life, let alone report it to Xu Zhang—yet not saying yes to Xu Zhang is like saying straight out that something is indeed wrong.

I am worried it might be another rumored romance that paparazzi would catch on, but then I think, *“What if he’s serious about her? The way he is, he wouldn’t care if the paparazzi chased him to the ends of the world.”*

The relationship doesn’t last long, though. Not sure how long it was after that, but I suddenly realize he’s back to staying at home writing songs, going to the gym, or racing cars on weekends. It is as if Ren Meilun has withdrawn from his life cleanly, not a trace left.

Only at times like this do I find Salinger a bit ruthless as a rock star. He wouldn’t have agreed to a date if he didn’t have a crush on the other person, but if he did, why did it end so plainly, without a wave?

After all, music is the only thing he can’t live without, right? Love can never bind this man.

TRACK 07

JULY arrives before we know it. No one in the band seems to have noticed the lightning-fast end to Salinger and Ren Meilun's relationship, except me. Over the next few weeks, LOTUS doesn't have any scheduled events as they will be concentrating on their fifth album. The new album will be a selection of songs from their previous singles and EPs, with one or two of them reworked, and four to five new singles. It is hard work indeed, but for the band, this is what they've always done. All of them are fully committed to it.

Most of the work is done at the office, where LOTUS has their own rehearsal studio. It was converted from a small workroom into a 150 sqm studio after the fire extinguisher incident, with a small mixing studio attached. Hai tells me that when he first started work as an assistant, he was excited every time he entered the studio. He thought it was a musical sanctuary, but later he stopped feeling so because LOTUS would often rehearse from daytime to midnight. Although the main songwriters of the band are Stone and Salinger, they still listen to the others' opinions. So, often, a chorus or bridge would be arranged in all the different ways until it has the exact right feeling, while the assistants have nothing to do but crash in the lounge.

The rehearsal studio and the lounge are just across the corridor from each other. There is no way to close the door to the sound of the bass and drums. It reminds me of the old days when I was in a band—sometimes I would be late to rehearsals because of my part-time job, and I would rush to the music room or the backstage of a live house. I would hear the guys playing their instruments from a distance. Even when I had a long day, hearing this sound would instantly bring me back to life.

Occasionally, I hear the drums from behind the door, but no bass; I wonder what Salinger is doing. The door opens. Salinger comes out with a freshly-lit cigarette in his hand, followed by Ji Shi shouting, "How dare you stay here when even Handsome Sai has gone out to smoke? The air con is on. Can't you just behave yourself?"

Then Stone gets tossed out. The door is pushed outwards so that when it opens, it hits Salinger on the back. Salinger covers the back of his head, looking back. The hand he uses to cover his head happens to be the right hand holding the cigarette, so hot ashes lands on Stone's head, causing a scene. Salinger apologizes.

Stone lowers his head to ask him, "Is there any more in my hair? Brush it out for me!"

"The ashes are still hot," says Salinger.

Stone glares up at him. Salinger waits a few seconds before raising his hand and smacking the ashes off.

Stone is furious. "What's wrong with you, Lin Sai—"

Another round of bickering.

I've bumped into the two of them being kicked out for smoking a few times. Salinger is leaning against the wall and Stone crouching in the corner, both dressed in simple T-shirts and jeans—not looking like celebrities at all, just two recent college graduates; as if Salinger is thinking about a philosophical proposition while

Stone worries about a failed exam.

Stone sometimes greets me, “Chi Nan, it’s hot out here. Why don’t you stay inside?”

I tell him I am going to the bathroom. When I turn around, I see Salinger slowly putting a cigarette to his mouth, his eyes looking in my direction. It is a fleeting moment, most likely, but the rising white smoke makes the scene look elegant, as if in slo-mo.

One day, they need a musician. Stone comes to me.

“Chi Nan, we’re one acoustic guitar player short. Can you come and help? It’s unplugged!”

I agree and hastily put down my cup of tea. Well, since it’s not electric anyway…

When I see Salinger in the studio, he nods at me and mouths “unplugged.” Although Stone has already told me that, seeing him reassuring me gives me a sense of comfort that I can get on board. I really feel that Salinger is the most reliable person in LOTUS, and he will never let me down. I am naïve, I guess.

Even though it’s unplugged, even though I’m just playing the backing guitar—a few chords at most—it is still exhilarating. Anyone who has ever been in a band can never forget that experience. It’s a chemical reaction. You’re shocked by the fireworks that erupt at the end, even if you’re just banging a triangle in there. You’re part of the fuse.

After this, Stone comes to me a lot. Sometimes it’s backing guitar, sometimes the harmonica, sometimes even an instrument I haven’t touched at all like the celesta—which thankfully is relatively easy to learn. Each time my sanity tells me it’s best to stay out of it, but I can’t resist the appeal of playing in a band. Luckily it isn’t live on stage, and the volume of the speakers in the studio generally is not turned up too high.

I walk past the studio one day, when Stone calls out to me again, “Chi Nan, help me with the sax. Thanks!”

“Stone,” Salinger stops him. “He’s not Superman.”

It takes Stone a moment to come back to reality from his fervor. Salinger nods at me from inside, so I step into the studio. As I head over, he takes off his own bass, handing it to me.

“You play the bass. I’ll take the sax.”

I freeze momentarily, taking it with both hands. For a second, I feel as if it is the heaviest bass in the world.

“Yeah, I forgot.” Stone grins. “You’ve done jazz!”

It is a white Fender custom bass, not the black one Salinger uses in concerts, but it *is* his own instrument with his laser autograph on the body, presumably a gift from the manufacturer. I’ve seen it at his house. He only plays it in rehearsals and in private.

The instrument has just been taken off and still carries a faint trace of body heat, which transfers onto my body. I try to avoid moving too much as I play, not even daring to shake the handle a little. I press down on the effects and soak up the low

and increasingly raspy tone of the bass. This is Salinger's bass. I don't know many musicians who are willing to lend their instruments to others, including myself, but Salinger lends me his. I think it wouldn't be wrong to say he trusts me. It is not the same as the one at the concert, but it is enough to satisfy me for a while.

The song was written by Stone. He deliberately experimented with a fusion style, so a saxophone solo was added. After the song is finished, Stone leads the applause.

"Congratulations to Salinger-*oppa* on his saxophone debut!"

Alan says as he bangs on the drums, "It was great. Nearly as good as the food stall band downstairs!"

The food stall band plays at a food stall near the office building. All four of them are sixty-something grandpas who taught themselves to play for their own amusement. Salinger is better than that, but not nearly as good as his guitar or bass. Apart from Salinger's sax, which is not as good as it should be, there is basically nothing to tweak on this one. The next song they plan to record is supposed to be the last new song of the album.

The demo Salinger made was already very well done. The song is a bit hardcore for LOTUS, with a lot of distorted effects on the guitar backing, fast and noisy drums, a chorus where all the instruments play in unison like a thousand horses, and a very distinct metallic touch. This is just a demo that Salinger made with an electronic synth keyboard. It is exciting to think how the instruments will sound when they are plugged in.

The reason this is hard rock is because of a request from Stone. He read some rock fans' comments online about the last album, saying that their rock is getting pop-ish and soft, especially the few big hits written by Stone. They thought the chords were too simple, the melody unvaried. Even Salinger was criticized for being repetitive and increasingly conservative. Stone was discussing this with Salinger in the nanny van the other day. They could sacrifice neither popularity nor fans, but they can't lose rock either. The balance tore at Stone for a while. Salinger said it just had to sound good, nothing else mattered. But when he was asked to write songs, he still gave Stone what he wanted.

The song, which proves LOTUS is still a hard rock band, remains untitled for now. Alan particularly likes it because the drum parts are rousing and challenging, but Stone is still a bit worried.

"The chorus vocal was too high. Shall we change it?"

Ji Shi waves his concerns away fearlessly. "It won't sound good if you change it. Just write it that way. Don't mind me!"

Stone looks at him incredulously. "Don't worry about you? You're the lead singer. How can we not?" He looks down at the lyrics again. "And are the lyrics too…"

As soon as the words leave his mouth, the lyrics in his hands are snatched by Salinger, who takes out his pen and corrects it in a few strokes. Slipping on the pen cap, he returns it to Stone.

"Done."

Ji Shi comes over to look at it, his face going pale. "It's all in English…"

“Ask Li Xiang to teach you. It’s easy,” Salinger says.

Ji Shi replies, “You’re the one who wrote it. Can’t you teach me?”

“I’m not that patient.”

Ji Shi pauses before saying, “You don’t need to be this honest.”

Stone is more than satisfied with the changed lyrics. The meaning hasn’t actually changed at all, but with the language barrier, the aggression feels much weaker.

Salinger goes back to playing bass while I am on backing guitar. Salinger rarely writes metal songs. While I could have excused myself, I don’t want to leave at this point at all. It’s the last song, anyway; let’s stick around until the revolution is won.

After a short electric intro, the bass cuts in with a big slide on the fuzz pedal. It’s always cool when someone with long arms does this slide, and even more impressive when the bass makes that engine roar under Salinger’s hands—as if saying, “Come to me. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

The lyrics are rather aggressive, especially when Ji Shi sings the chorus:

You said I let you down

With your dreams all gone

But I do not care

You’re okay or done

True I failed you here

Yet I conquered there

So I do not care

You like me or not

All you want

Is to take me as your drug

All I want

Is crashing you down when I am wearing the crown I can bear

When “crashing you down” comes up, the drums and bass are catching on fire. The distorted guitars scream like a metal wall, destroying everything, pointing a finger at a critic’s nose and telling them where to go.

It is sick!

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

By lunchtime, Hai can’t resist knocking on the door. Because the whole morning has been so productive, the arrangements and lyrics have been finalized and all we have to do is sort them out. It’s time to start recording in the studio. So when Hai pokes his head in, saying he's hungry, Stone doesn't tell him to go away.

During lunch, Xiaoxiao and Lisa are still watching dramas on an iPad. Ji Shi stands there watching for a while and suddenly squats, laughing.

“Holy shit, what the hell are these costumes?”

Xiaoxiao looks at the vocalist crouching at her feet, obviously unable to understand what he is laughing at. “The lead actor is pretty handsome.”

Hai asks while eating, “Who’s the female lead?”

“Ren Meilun,” Xiaoxiao and Lisa reply in unison.

“Ren Meilun?” Stone looks at Salinger. “That unlucky girl you were in a team with last time?”

I can’t help but look at Salinger, too. I feel as though my heart is electrified, as if I am the one being asked. Salinger is calmer than me somehow, ignoring Stone’s teasing.

“What’s the name of the show?”

“*Invoking the Dragon*,” Xiaoxiao says.

Salinger nods, searching the show on his phone. Stone is incredulous.

“You actually want to watch this idol drama, too?”

Salinger says, “I promised her last time we met. She had seen our concert, so I said I would watch her drama some other time.”

Stone gets suspicious. “You don’t have something going on with her, do you? Why else would you make that kind of promise?”

Salinger says it was just a casual conversation.

“A casual promise and you’re really going to watch it?”

Salinger says a casual promise is still a promise. It wouldn’t kill him to have a look. Stone is flabbergasted. His eyes turn to me as I lower my head, pretending to concentrate on my food.

“Chi Nan, I noticed you’re calm even when you eat.” Stone-*ge* pulls up a chair next to me, sits down, and asks me, “Wrote any songs lately?”

I can’t pretend I didn’t hear that. “I haven’t written much lately.”

“Shouldn’t have been the case.” He moves his chair a little closer, glancing at Salinger on the couch. “You should be inspired when you’re this close to your idol. Is there Salinger overworking you with his crap?”

“No.” He obviously has an ulterior motive. I immediately sit upright. “I’m not overworked—”

Alan slaps me on the shoulder. “Must be disillusioned, seeing his idol like this!”

“There’s no such thing,” I tell him, but I am already surrounded by interrogators. I can barely move my chopsticks with so many people behind me.

Li Xiang pats my back, saying in a serious voice, “I know how you feel. It’s not about disillusionment; sometimes it’s not easy to find inspiration when you’re too close to your idols, because there’s a sense of satisfaction. You think your dreams have been fulfilled and you start slacking. Inspiration will only come when you push. Comfort cannot breed good work.”

Is that it? I can't help but wonder. The leader's words are always too sharp to be refuted. I really haven't written anything for months. Inspiration is fleeting, like sparks. I did jot some things down on a notebook, but I always seem to lack the drive and motivation to get it done. It is really the opposite of what I have imagined. The worst part is I actually feel a sense of satisfaction, like a teenager who starts playing basketball because he admires Jordan and Kobe. When he can watch them play for free every day, he might not really find the time to practice on his own.

"Will you let him eat his lunch?" Salinger speaks up from the couch.

"I'm sorry, but I'm just afraid of what you'd do." Stone shrugs. "You've never let us release an album without gossip. Please don't get us in any trouble for our fifth-anniversary album."

Salinger says, "No problem. From now until release day, I promise not to get involved with any woman. You don't need to make a fuss anymore."

I know he will do so if he dares to say it. After all, the affair with Ren Meilun is over. I don't believe he'll start another relationship anytime soon; apparently, he doesn't think so either.

After lunch, I go to the bathroom to wash my face. When I pass the studio, it is quiet, so I open the door thinking no one is inside. Instead, I see Salinger coming out of the remix room. I feel like a bank security guard going into the vault to feast his eyes on the treasures after work who just so happens to bump into the manager.

"Uh, I just came to see if there's anything that needs packing," I say.

Salinger presses his hands to his waist and looks around. "There's a lot. Would you like to help me?"

We end up spending almost an hour clearing up the set—the instruments, the microphones, the tangled wires on the floor, and the white electric bass I just played.

Salinger chuckles. I don't get what he is laughing at, but it must have been me.

"I don't know how to say this." He comes over and lifts the white bass a little to put it in the case. The lid is still open, and both of us look at it. "Every time you look at it, I can feel your love all over it."

I am no less embarrassed than Ji Shi when he was betrayed by a doll. I can only force myself to be nonchalant. "Because it's so beautiful. Tone is great, too."

No, it's just because it's your bass.

Salinger closes the lid, lifting the case as he says to me, "Thank you."

The "thank you" is so sincere that I think I know what he is thanking me for. "I'm your assistant. It's my job." *To cover for you.*

He says, "I'm not thanking you for dealing with Stone and the guys. It's Xu Zhang."

Xu Zhang *is* a bit difficult to deal with, so I say, "All I'm going to do is assist you in your work. No one has the right to interfere with your private life."

That is the bottom line, and I'll help you keep it that way.

"Do you really feel disillusioned?" Salinger asks.

“No, nothing like that! You wouldn’t be my idol if I’m disillusioned that easily __”

As long as you stay true to yourself in music, as long as music and rock are still your aspirations, then nothing can disillusion me.

“That’s good,” Salinger says as he slings his bass bag over his shoulder. “I might be a little sad if you become disillusioned with me.”

My mouth falls open. He says it in a casual tone, but I am going to take it seriously. No way would he…

Like someone who couldn’t wait to return a favor, I quickly say, “By the way, I love that song, ‘I Don’t Care’!”

It’s a metal style rarely seen from your work. You really excel in everything—except the sax, of course.

Salinger nods.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, I’m going back to the lounge.” I say, “Feel free to call me if you need anything.”

“Chi Nan.”

I turn just in time to hear him say, “Inspiration will come.”

Just like the inaudible “unplugged,” it suddenly reassures and comforts me.

Ms. Zhang comes to Salinger’s house every week at the same time to cook and clean. Although she has been doing housekeeping for almost two years, she doesn’t dare to disturb Salinger at all. When I go to his house, I usually get a call from her asking if I have arrived. She only asks to come in after I’ve arrived, as Salinger is always sleeping or in the studio writing and mixing songs.

When he is locked in the studio, he’s not always working on songs for LOTUS. After all, the album is almost ready. Sometimes it is just a casual re-mix of a song, or arranging a string version, or a hardcore version of an originally acoustic song. It’s like he’s playing an offline game. I go to Salinger’s house every two or three days. Ms. Zhang mentions to me more than once that she dreads cleaning Salinger’s studio the most.

“There isn’t even a window in that studio, and he still smokes in it. You don’t even know; the whole room stinks of tobacco. I really don’t know how he stays in there all night—”

I say it isn’t his fault. He has to smoke if he’s going to stay up late writing, and it’s a music studio, so the soundproofing has to be good or it would be too noisy for the neighbors. It is impossible to install a window.

“You still wanna take his side?” Ms. Zhang looks at me oddly. “There’s more. His sheet music is thrown everywhere, all over the table and floor. Once, I helped him clean it up. He came downstairs to the studio and as soon as he pushed the door open, he froze there with a look on his face as if I had torn his house down!”

Ms. Zhang and I are in the elevator. I laugh as I listen to her rant.

She adds, “Don’t laugh. It’s not funny! I didn’t dare to go into his studio, but I couldn’t not clean it up. Luckily, you came. His previous assistant and I couldn’t do

anything about the studio. When he was sleeping, I didn't dare to wake him and ask him to tidy up his sheet music, so I could only clean around them. I was surprised to see he trusts you enough to let you tidy up the sheet music for him!"

I say, "Maybe it's because I know music. Those scores aren't that scary. Just put them in the order he wrote them."

"I don't know anything about music. I think it'd be better if he wrote titles on them or something. It's all a mess; no page numbers, a page here and a page there. All those squiggles look like talismans drawn by ghosts. Only you musicians can understand it." Ms. Zhang sighs. "Chi Nan, why don't you become a singer like Salinger?"

I don't know what to tell her except, "I'm not as good as him. Besides, he's not a singer, he's a bassist."

"You're all in the music business anyway. But you don't say—Salinger plays the piano beautifully. A handsome guy in front of a piano; girls would love him for sure, if only he smoked less."

I am a bit surprised. "Have you ever heard him play the piano?"

"Yes," says Ms. Zhang. "I came over to cook once and met a little girl downstairs crying. She said she came here to ask her father for her school fee, but he wouldn't open the door for her, so she cried outside. Lots of people saw it at the time, and everyone felt sorry for the little girl. I ranted to Salinger when I came up. He asked me where the girl was and went downstairs to bring her up! Paid her tuition fee and asked her to stay for dinner. The girl kept looking at the piano, so he played it for her. Really the nicest celebrity I've ever seen, if only he'd smoke less—"

She brings it back to smoking again. My head is still full of Salinger playing the piano for the little girl. I can't help but remember the reticent young man with the black guitar on his back taking the girl through the snowy forest in the microfilm "*Catcher in the Rye*."

When I enter the house, it is quiet again. Salinger is probably upstairs sleeping, so I go ahead and clean up the studio. It's time to do a little tidying today; I have to make room for Ms. Zhang.

Pushing the door open, a sheet of music gets lifted into the air by the wind. It drifts to my feet, and I kneel to pick it up. It really does look like a squiggly talisman. I can imagine him writing notes down and crossing stuff out. All manuscripts look like this; as long as they themselves can read them, nobody draws their tadpoles properly.

Gathering up the scattered scores is like solving a jigsaw puzzle. I start humming the tunes he wrote last night without realizing. Some are incomplete, about half-finished. Some are pretty much done, perhaps written to be used in the album in case other songs didn't work. Some are polyphonic arrangements that take time for you to imagine what they'll sound like.

Others might find this studio messy. To me, it is a musical paradise. If you know its language, everything you see and hear is celestial. What was that saying about looking beyond the surface?

I crouch on the floor to put away the scattered sheet music, but I find a song with a "w" written at the top. It seems to be missing a page. I squat, humming again. I'm

sure I'm not mistaken. The main melody seems complete. The second chorus even goes on three times, so it doesn't seem like a bad idea to end it here. But it is a full musical arrangement, and the bass line that guides the whole thing hasn't reached its finale yet. The little solo on the guitar is more like the build-up before a chorus. I don't think it will end here by any means. But I can't find the missing page anywhere, so I go through the pile in my hand to see if it is stuck between pages or if I arranged it in the wrong order. It isn't there. I stare at the bin next to the workbench, wondering if Salinger has thrown it away by mistake.

From behind me comes Ms. Zhang's surprised voice. "Nan, why are you going through the trash?"

I unfold all the discarded sheet music to check. Still nothing. I have to give up.

Ms. Zhang looks at my hands, full of cigarette ashes, and shakes her head. "You musicians are crazy."

I say, "Zhang-*jie*, when you clean up later, could you see if there's another sheet of music somewhere?"

"Missing a piece?" She gets a little nervous. "Really? Salinger will blame me for tearing his house down again."

I have to take Salinger's SUV in for maintenance, so I can't stay long. When I get stuck in traffic on the overpass, the melody on the score keeps echoing in my head, haunting me. It is a great tune; somewhat melancholic, but powerfully arranged. A thunderous bass, stormy drums and shouting guitars. It makes me want to hear the demo.

Back home, I get a call from Ms. Zhang; she couldn't find the sheet music. I can't tell if I am worried that Salinger has lost it, or if I am sorry that I won't see the real ending of the song. I spend the rest of the evening writing down the arrangements from memory. The incomplete score is, to me, as attractive as Goldbach's Conjecture is to any mathematician in the world—as Venus de Milo is to any artist in the world. You just can't resist the temptation.

With the computer and keyboard synthesizer on, I write as I play it, following the trajectory of the bass, filling in the drums, writing the guitars and decorating it with electronic effects. Because the original arrangement has a full range of sounds, the melody just flows from my fingers. When the mixed tune flows out of the speakers in its entirety, it is already dawn before I know it.

This is the first song I've arranged in full in months. Although it is Salinger's song, it is no less encouraging. I don't know how far the finished product is from his intentions, but it doesn't seem to matter anymore.

Pulling back the curtains, the sun rises like bonfire through the gap between two skyscrapers.

Bonfire.

I mumble the word. Like the opening title of a film, it is written into my mind like quicksand. The wind will erase it any moment, and I have to hurry.

I turn back to the ideas notebook in my backpack. I am not sleepy at all now. It's a great song title. An inspiration in the notebook calling to me, like a sunrise after a long, endless night.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

I start writing songs again, replacing the vocals with strings since I can't sing them myself anymore. I can't afford to rent a studio, so even though I can play guitar and bass, I still have to synthesize the arrangement with keyboards—but it is better than nothing. I upload it. After months of silence, I wonder how many people are still looking forward to it.

On this day, I have to go to the Maserati workshop to pick up the SUV. I go to let Ms. Zhang in before taking the car keys and leave, but on the way, I get a call from her. She is so anxious over the phone as she tells me to hurry back. I ask her several times, but she can't tell me what is going on.

I rush back to Salinger's house, where she opens the door for me.

"What's wrong?"

She looks like she is going to be sick.

"Nan, what should I do? There were no lights on in the living room when I came in, so I tried to pull the curtains back and didn't notice. It just—"

She looks back into the living room where a white electric bass sits on the couch. I have a hunch. As I walk over to it, my heart sinks. It's the same white bass I played.

"The guitar was sitting on the piano. I wasn't paying attention when I walked over to pull the curtains. When I turned around, I knocked it on the floor. What should I do?"

I pick up the bass to check. The peeling paint on the board is not so important, but the head has a gash in it that will affect the intonation and sound quality. I am baffled. *How did it suddenly get like this? It used to sound so beautiful.*

"Nan, say something. Not this face, please. Do you think it can be fixed?"

I know that Ms. Zhang didn't mean it; no one wants something like this to happen. "This can't be fixed without a professional. Even they may not be able to do it."

"What should we do? Is it expensive?"

It isn't a mass-produced Fender. It has Salinger's name lasered onto its body; it must have been custom-made. I am at a loss as to what I can do. If I ask Ms. Zhang to pay for it, she certainly wouldn't be able to afford it.

I tell her to go home for now, saying I'll talk to Salinger about it. It is no use having her here except to continue crying about it. Salinger will be even more upset.

Ms. Zhang leaves, still anxious. I stand alone in the living room with the bass in my arms. My grim face is reflecting on the smooth white body. Without even attempting to plug it in, I know the instrument is seriously, irreversibly damaged.

It can no longer be played by Salinger. If an instrument can dream, the dream is over.

I wait alone until 2.30 p.m. when I finally hear Salinger stir in his room. I wait for him to finish washing up and come downstairs. He is surprised to see me.

"You haven't left yet?"

I then tell him about the bass. Salinger *does* look as if someone has torn his house apart as he takes the bass from my hands. He looks at it over and over. The spacious apartment falls extremely silent under his intent gaze.

I ask him, "I wonder if I can send it back to Fender to be fixed? If you want to send it in for repair, I'll get in touch now."

"It can't be fixed. It wouldn't be the same even if they fix it." He puts the bass down. "It's meant to be."

I know it would be difficult, but I didn't expect him to just give up, as if he has fully digested the bad news in those few minutes of silence. A thought comes that if it had been Stone, he would not have accepted it so calmly. He would have tried to save it in vain regardless of the damage, but Salinger isn't like that. It seems as if he is naturally good at accepting tragedy—never struggling in vain, so that all tragedies are like unplayable notes with him.

"Zhang-*jie* told me to ask how much the bass cost. I didn't tell her—"

"It's not like you can pay for it to be the same again. You tell her it's five grand, end of."

The actual price of the bass is probably many times that figure; a price Ms. Zhang cannot afford to pay with her salary. This is just a lesson to Zhang-*jie* without overly embarrassing her. It is a price both within her means and not one she can pay so easily.

Salinger looks back at me. "Is this what you stayed to tell me?"

I nod as I ask him, "Lin Sai-*ge*, what are you going to do with this bass?"

"Is it still playable?"

I plug in the power and sound box to play. "The circuit is fine."

But the intonation is off. Salinger sits on the couch watching me play. The little change in intonation is reflected on him clearer than I can hear. He can't loosen his frown the whole time. In the end, he stares at the bass in my hand, deep in thought, before asking me, "What do you think?"

"How about…listing it online for a charity auction?"

"What's the point of auctioning it when the bass is damaged?"

"A real fan wouldn't mind," I tell him.

"A fan like you?" He stares up at me. "You seemed more upset than I was to see it broken."

There is light in his eyes, a crescent-shaped curve that makes them look deep as night, as if this room full of sunlight can't reach them, as if they can lure out everyone's secrets.

"Chi Nan," he says. "You should keep this bass."

I freeze in disbelief. "Can I?"

“Don’t sell it in secret.”

“No way!” I know he is joking, but I am still overwhelmed. I look down at the white bass, the name “Salinger” lasered in English glistening in the sunlight, and say, “I’ll cherish it for the rest of my life.”

Salinger smiles. “I think the case is in the studio. You can take it with you once it’s packed.”

I go to the studio to pick up the case. When I return, Salinger is looking at me and the bass on my back, head tilted. He seems like he is saying goodbye to it, but he soon accepts what has happened.

Before I leave, I can’t help but turn around to ask, “Why did you give it to me?”

Salinger lifts a hand to touch the bass bag on my back, his fingers pausing at the zip. The light silver zip trembles at the touch of his fingers. “I think it likes you as well. It’s only natural to unite those who share their sentiments.”

I take the broken bass home with me. When I get to the metro station and am asked to go through security, the screening lane won’t let the bass case pass. The staff asks me to open it for inspection. I decide not to, somehow not wanting to take it off and display it in front of everyone, so I turn around to leave the metro station and get a taxi.

When I get home, I feel a sense of relief, as if I have finally arrived safely at home with the Heart of the Ocean. I take out the bass, connect it to the power supply and sound box, and sweep on the strings. The bass has a low, mellow tone that is a little out of tune and no longer up to the standards of Salinger with his impeccable intonation, but it is still unique to me.

It has once been Salinger’s weapon. It will always be his weapon, his warhorse, his sword, his armor.

TRACK 08

MY new songs “Bonfire” and “Hero” were written without lyrics; I replaced the main parts either with strings or electronic music. Because they are instrumental music, I can only categorize them as instrumental and soundtrack, so I didn’t receive too much response after uploading them. Although feedback is slow coming, it steadily increases. Seeing that old friends haven’t left and new followers express how much they like them, I feel encouraged.

--“Bonfire” is so beautiful. The arrangement of “Hero” is so Salinger-esque!

--It’s not very polite to say that to a songwriter, is it?

--Don’t worry. He’s a huge Salinger fan! I’m sure he’s happy to hear that!

I find myself giggling as I stare at that last comment. Now I don’t even have to respond. Everyone can prove I am a fully certified Salinger fan. Tributes and learning from him only though, copying or stealing is not acceptable. I want people to think of Salinger when they hear my tunes because he is the perfect blueprint in my mind, but I don’t want them to think of a particular song by Salinger, so this is just right.

--I was wondering why you were writing instrumental music, but I clicked and found it sounded wonderful. The lack of vocals has probably made me pay more attention to the instruments. The guitar and bass parts sound so good, and the electronic tracks are so well arranged. Are you planning to step into the soundtrack business?

Although it is just a benevolent teasing comment, it still hurts to think about it. I get stuck on this comment for a long time. I want to reply with a smiley emoji, or just ignore it, but then I think—why avoid it when it is all compliments except for the last sentence?

If there is anything that needs to be argued against, it is that my songs have nothing to do with soundtracks. It is still rock and roll. That is all I’ve ever wanted to make. When I cover my ears to enjoy Salinger’s sublime arrangements or bass lines, there is no need for lyrics either, yet his spirit is still there. Even if I only listen to the language of guitar and bass, I can still hear how untamed and rebellious he is, never surrendering.

I reply,

--It’s still rock without lyrics. I can still rock without singing!

I add a smiley emoji at the end. I can still write songs that people like. There is no need to be sad. I just stopped singing, isn’t it the same with Salinger? I don’t think he ever felt sad. And if he did, he got over it.

Usually, I go to the supermarket early in the morning to buy fresh ingredients and bring them to Salinger’s apartment for Ms. Zhang to cook, but today she is off work. There is an authentic Japanese restaurant near my place I frequent, and I’ve gotten to know the owner well. Sometimes when Ms. Zhang cannot come, I bring the ingredients to the restaurant for the owner to cook before bringing it to Salinger.

“Your girlfriend is kinda lazy,” the owner says as he hands me the finished meal.

The owner is from Japan; he's lived in China for ten years and speaks Mandarin very well.

I take the food. "I don't have a girlfriend."

Intrigued, the owner asks as he leans over the counter, "*Boyfriend?*"

I don't know what face to make. "Not a lover."

"Not lovers? Why do you take such good care of this person if you're not lovers?"

I have to say, "He's my boss."

"Your boss is young, then." He grins as he leans on the counter. "And I'm guessing no lovers and no family."

It's true that I've never seen his family, I think to myself, *but lovers, he's had no shortage of.*

The owner is leisurely wiping the counter when he says, "I bet your boss is handsome and stylish, probably has excellent taste in clothes."

The noodles slide from my chopsticks. "You can tell?"

"I can tell just by looking at you." The owner comes over for a closer glance at me. "You've changed a lot in the past six months compared to when I first met you. Before, I thought you were quite young and a bit shy, but recently I've had several girls asking about you. Chi Nan, you've been single for quite a while. Do you want me to set you up with one of them?"

"No need!"

There is no end to this man's gossiping once you get him started, so I finish my noodles in a few bites, then get up and pay for breakfast as well as the cooking fees. I lift the curtain and leave.

On second thought, I turn to say, "Let fate have its way."

After all, fate has been amazing.

When I arrive at the Salinger's apartment, a heavy black motorbike comes out of the garage with a breeze. I freeze by the curbside before I recognize it as a Ducati 1199. Salinger should still be asleep at this time, yet there can't be another black Ducati 1199 in the building, can there?

I want to call him to confirm, but decide not to. I have the keys to his apartment, anyway. Picking up the bags, I am about to get going when I hear the rumbles of the engine again and instinctively turn around to see the Ducati, which has just ridden away, turning back.

It breaks in front of me as I feel the heat hitting me. The sound of the engine fades. Salinger leans on one leg and lifts his goggles.

"Chi Nan? Is it really you?"

I take a good look at him. He is in his racing suit. "Are you going out?"

"Yeah, to the racetracks."

I nod. It doesn't look like he will be eating at home.

He looks down at what I am carrying. “Leave that in the fridge. I’ll be back to eat tonight.”

I mutter a yes and am about to see him off on his Ducati, but Salinger doesn’t start the engine. He holds onto the handles for a moment, then lets go to take off his helmet instead. He ruffles his hair as his gaze turns to the lunchbox I am carrying.

“I just remembered I haven’t had breakfast. Do you have any nori roll sushi?”

I open the bag with the sushi and hand him the chopsticks. Salinger is about to take them when he realizes he is wearing racing gloves with his helmet in his other hand, so he doesn’t.

“You mind feeding it to me?”

“Ah… Oh, sure!”

I don’t mind, personally. It’s just that, if a passerby sees us—a guy feeding another guy—they’ll probably give us weird looks.

I pick up a piece of nori roll sushi to feed him, another hand holding underneath ready to catch. I just hope there aren't any reporters, fans, or paparazzi hiding around. I wonder if the first two assistants also did something like this. If they did, no wonder they couldn’t hold the line in the end. Luckily, I’m a guy, so I have no trouble with this. I just feel…a little awkward, I guess.

Salinger leans closer to the chopsticks. I don’t know why—maybe it is the rare sight of the whorl on his crown which I usually am not able to see given his height, or the fact that his eyes are less distant and cold when they are downcast, but I think he looks like a rebellious high school student. It even reminds me of what Alan said about him being a troublemaker when he was a kid. He honestly doesn’t think anything is wrong with having a guy feed him. I feel like a junior year sidekick respectfully lighting a ciggie for the senior year bully, which makes me feel funny.

I am lost in my own thoughts when Salinger looks up and says, "Steady."

It sounds like the low mellow voice of a wicked troublemaker, so I hold it steady. I only let go when he bites the chopsticks. He takes big bites, taking a large part of the chopsticks in. After all, he does not bite carefully as a girl would. I quickly pull the chopsticks out of his mouth, suddenly self-conscious. I think our positions are a bit suggestive even for two men. It is very much unlike lighting a cigarette.

Not knowing how many more he is planning to eat, it finally dawns on me that the task of picking up the nori rolls and putting them to his lips is not as easy as I thought.

Salinger finishes the four nori rolls. It only takes him two or three minutes. He is not a girl; he doesn’t care about his image when he eats, nor does he chew slowly like Li Xiang, who suffers from gastritis. He thanks me as he finishes, then puts on his helmet, snapping down the visor. The Ducati roars away, leaving me standing by the side of the road, putting the lid on my lunchbox as an afterthought in the warm gust of exhaust.

Standing in the elevator, I can’t help but recall the scene just now. The more I think about it, the more amused I get. It was the first time I’ve fed someone. It should have been a romantic scene, but the other person was not a cute girl but a dashing guy who also happened to be my idol. Should I call it a romantic encounter or not?

I put everything in the fridge. As I pass the studio, I push the door open for a look out of habit. A few scores are scattered on the workstation again, so I sort them out. That reminds me—I still don't know if Salinger has found the missing score, and he didn't ask me or Zhang about it.

I am leaving when I suddenly get a call from Xu Zhang.

"Hey, Chi Nan, where's Salinger? He hasn't been answering my calls."

I say he went racing, and add, "He's on his motorbike. He won't be able to hear."

"Has he gone to the racetrack?" Xu Zhang asks.

I detect hesitation in his tone. "What's wrong, Xu Zhang-*ge*? Is it urgent?"

"Yeah, something did happen. We need everyone back at the office to discuss it. Both Stone and Ji Shi have arrived. Could you find a way to contact him and get him to come over?"

Xu Zhang asks so nicely. As an assistant, I have no choice but to do so. I call Salinger again and send two texts, but he doesn't answer, so I have to go there myself.

The racetrack is called Windchill Speedway. It is further away than I thought; so far that I am surprised by the fee when the taxi arrives. There is barely anyone around. It is all straight lanes and shades cast by lines of trees. Occasionally one or two street racers and heavy motorbikes speed past us. Even before the taxi stops, I can hear the thundering sound of racing bikes from a distance.

I have put on my earmuffs before I get off the taxi, but they are useless when I get to the racetrack. I thought it was just a circular track, no bigger than a stadium. Instead, 800 meters of straight lanes lay in front of me. Various bends and obstacles stretch beyond that. It is breathtaking; makes you want to try just by seeing it.

When I arrive, a black motorbike is accelerating down the straight lane. The heat from the tires rubbing against the ground makes the air reflect light. I have a feeling that it's a Ducati 1199. The rider in black leaning over the heavy bike looks familiar.

The first time I saw Salinger on a motorbike was in a trending video on Weibo. It was a video of a paparazzi chasing his bike—the paparazzi recognized it, held up his phone, and asked the driver to "Chase after him, now!" In order to get a clear shot of him, the paparazzi got so close the car was almost touching his bike. At the red light, the paparazzi kept recklessly pointing the camera at him. They were probably not the only ones chasing him; several girls' voices were heard in the car, clearly all very excited. The rider on the Ducati 1199 turned to look, his face obscured by the reflective visor.

The paparazzi holding the phone shamelessly shouted, "Salinger, look this way!"

When the light turned green, the paparazzi immediately told the driver to "Keep up, keep up, he's going to speed up." He was right, because once beyond the light, the rider plonked down on the heavy bike. The Ducati 1199 roared. In the space of two seconds, he left the pursuing car behind, the deafening sound of the exhaust pipe drowning out the voices of everyone else.

Now Salinger is even faster than he was then. At this speed, we can only catch a glimpse of him as he crosses the track. There is no way he can see me. However, to my relief, the Ducati 1199 starts to slow down before it has completed the

acceleration and finally stops at the start point with a flash of its taillight.

I hurry over as Salinger takes off his helmet, bracing his right leg on the ground and twists around to look at me in confusion.

I wait for him outside as he leaves the racetrack. When the black Ducati comes out, Salinger looks surprised to see me.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, go ahead back to the office on your bike. I’ll follow in the taxi,” I tell him.

It occurred to me on the way here that there is no way Salinger would take me in his Ducati, nor is it possible to get a taxi or a ride so out of the way, so I asked the driver to wait for me outside. The rates are high anyway and the traffic is good, so it’s a good deal for the driver.

Salinger puts on his helmet and gives me a faint smile. “Tell the driver not to tag along if he can’t keep up. I’ll probably be at the office half an hour before you. Wait for my call. If it’s nothing important, you don’t have to come. Just go home.”

I say okay and get into the taxi. Salinger’s Ducati is just ahead of us on the left. He glances back at me again and says, “Next time, don’t come here to find me.”

I feel apologetic, thinking that he probably doesn’t want to be disturbed in his private time when he adds, “It’s not good for your ears.”

With that, he snaps down his visor. I don’t even catch a glimpse of his face as he speaks. By the time the taxi starts, the black Ducati is only a distant shadow, so there is no chance of us following.

The restaurant owner isn’t completely right. Salinger might have been able to unconsciously influence people around him with his style. He influences Alan, influences Ji Shi, influences me, but I don’t think there is anyone in this world who can possibly imitate him.

Why?

Because he is Schrödinger's cat. Paradoxical and unexpected, Schrödinger’s Salinger.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Xu Zhang calls everyone back to the company because of an unexpected event. LOTUS has already booked a recording studio for their new album, but the company received a surprise invitation from Japan.

Five years after their debut, LOTUS rose to the top of the industry with astonishing speed and popularity. They’ve even become a powerful fan-collector in Southeast Asia and South Korea, even holding a concert in Madison Square Garden, but never in Japan. The reasons are complicated—LOTUS’s agency, Yitian, is part of the label Shengnian. All of LOTUS’s record contracts are with Shengnian, which was originally the Chinese branch of Japan’s largest record label SN. When SN split, Shengnian became independent and took LOTUS’s record contracts with them. SN’s top executives were furious about this and warned LOTUS not to come to Japan for future events, so LOTUS’s records are not released in Japan. No local producers dared to take them on for concerts, either. As SN’s board reshuffled, the

new SN decided to offer an olive branch to LOTUS.

SN has the world's best recording studios. They've also arranged for LOTUS to record a new album with renowned saxophonist Benjamin Rodger and rock violinist Ryoko Nishino, along with a fan meeting for LOTUS. The offer is so sincere that even the dignified Stone agrees after only thirty minutes of hesitation.

The schedule is tight, but everyone in LOTUS gets on top of things for once. No one is late on the way to the airport. In the VIP lounge, Ji Shi even emotes.

"Damn, this is hard to come by. I used to feel like a thief every time I went to Japan on vacation…"

Stone glares at him. "When did you go to Japan behind my back? Didn't we agree to make common cause with the enemy?" Turning his head again, he asks the gang, "Have you ever gone to Japan behind my back?"

When he points at Salinger, his finger is gently slapped away. "Don't be so childish."

"Oh my god, you went too, haven't you?! Was I the only one stupid enough to take it seriously?!"

"You're not the only one." Leader Li Xiang pats Stone on the shoulder reassuringly. "I also—"

Touched, Stone goes to hold his hand.

"—Only went there once."

Alan is looking up something on his phone. "Hey, Nishino Ryoko is pretty. She's my type!"

Stone reaches out for a glance. "Too bad none of these sexy, cute girls like you," he says, glancing back at Salinger, who is sitting on the couch with his head down, playing on his phone. "It has to be guys like that, you know?"

Alan looks down at Ryoko Nishino's picture, then up at Salinger with defiance, finally sitting over, waving his phone in front of Salinger. "What do you think? A rock violinist, better than your rumored girlfriends."

Salinger finally glances at the phone due to his insistent waving. Alan immediately puts the phone away, looking like he got just what he wanted.

"I knew it! You're just pretending to be indifferent all the time; at the sight of a beautiful woman, you'd still be *dokidoki*[18]!"

Salinger looks down as he continues to play with his phone. "You're overthinking it. Looking at pretty faces doesn't give me the *dokidoki*."

"So what does? Nudes?" Alan asks. Hai nudges him on his side, reminding him to watch what he says.

Salinger says, "I *doki* when you play the drums particularly well."

Alan stares at Salinger and slowly blinks twice. "Really? Wow, you praising me like this actually makes me kind of…" He says, rubbing his chest and looking over at Stone. "I feel like a visual novel character being conquered. Okay, okay, okay, fine, I'll let you have a look!"

“Nah, thanks, keep it for your own *dokidoki*.” Salinger arches his back to continue playing his game and ignores him again.

“Salinger, you’re not that petty, right? Just take a look. What if she’s your type? Won’t you miss out on an international love affair?”

The others are trying to hold back their laughs when Salinger suddenly rips off his headphones and stands up. Startled, Alan flinches. Salinger pulls up his hood over his head. Nothing happens. He just turns and calls out to me.

“Chi Nan, come walk with me for a while.”

Alan cranes his neck before pulling up his own hoodie.

I heard from Hai that when LOTUS first started playing as a band, some troublemakers tried to smash up the venue they were playing at. Their male fans got into a fight with the troublemakers. LOTUS was a rock band after all, and they were still in their youth, so all five of them came down to fight. The scene turned to chaos. According to Alan, Salinger was a tough fighter. Even when someone hit him on the back with a steel pipe, he stood tall, ripped the pipe out of the guy’s hands and hit back, expressionless but as violent as you could get.

The fact that Alan said that meant that he really admired Salinger at that time. He also said that Salinger didn’t have a pattern when he fought; he just kicked one guy after another. He cared for his hands, so he rarely used his fists. If someone hit him with a bottle or a pipe, he wouldn’t even use his hands to shield himself. If he couldn’t dodge, he would just turn around to take it on his back. When they failed to knock him out, the attacker was often shocked into confusion. Salinger would just turn around to kick him then.

That day, he knocked out the guy who was causing trouble and stomped him in the face, knocking a tooth out of his mouth without even blinking. After the troublemakers were kicked out, the venue was a mess. Salinger kicked the rubbish off the floor, went on stage, and put his bass back on.

“There’s still half an hour to go. Do you still wanna hear us?”

The shouting from the fans was so loud it was like mountains and seas roaring. Alan said he almost knelt before Salinger then. I guess it was on that day that Alan started thinking Salinger must have been a delinquent or a gangster back in high school.

I look at Salinger walking in front of me. Perhaps it is his 6'1" height, his rock-star glamor, or maybe I am too familiar with the way he carries his bass with such ease. In the eyes of a fan, just the sight of his back looks invincible. Even Alan thought he could take any blow without blinking. But stripped of that glamor, what remains is just flesh and blood.

Rock musicians are easy to love and easy to hate. No band in the world has never been in trouble. Even though my band was only together for less than a year, we encountered guys at rehearsals who threatened us to either pay up or not to come again. I arrived early at rehearsal that day, and the rogues were surprised.

They asked me, “You’re alone? Did you bring the money?”

I was beaten up badly that day. Seemingly by instinct, I kept taking the punches and kicks with my back as I was kicked to the ground, so much that I started to wander off. Whether it was starting a band or studying music at a second-rate music

school, I often felt lost, thinking that the world of music was probably divided into upper and lower classes—that people like us were destined to stay on the fringes of this world for the rest of our lives. It wasn't that I couldn't give them the money or anything, I just didn't want to. I didn't want to grovel on the edge of the world looking in. If I must pay up respectfully before every rehearsal or performance, then it would be like kowtowing before singing about rock and roll. It would be disgusting.

The inspiration for a song was born at the inopportune moment as I was getting beaten up badly. I mumbled the lyrics for fear that I would forget them later if I was knocked unconscious. Finally, the guys called me "crazy" and left. I got up and wrote the song with my untouched hands. The sheet music looked violent with my blood on it, but the whole song was finished in one go. By the grace of my Muse, even my subpar handwriting looked like a lotus flower growing out of mud.

I covered my face with the sheet music crammed full of notes, feeling the gentle sunlight cast through the paper.

The world of rock and roll is not all sunshine and rainbows. Suffering and painful beatings only awaken us to the world and make us more determined to achieve what we want. I always think that it was the beating I took that day, the confusion and defiance that flashed chaotically through my mind, that made me go on alone even after my bandmates all left.

The more pain you endure, the longer you go. So don't be afraid of pain.

At least that was how it always used to be.

There is a piano downstairs in the terminal building. A young man is playing a song called "I Believe." Salinger stands watching on the second floor next to the glass barrier. The young man plays for a while before his girlfriend calls him away.

"Wouldn't you like to play?" Salinger suddenly asks me.

He is wearing sunglasses, so naturally I can't see his expression. I glance at the piano downstairs. Judging from when the young man played it earlier, the tone is quite good and it has clearly been tuned recently.

I tell him, "I'll go down and play for a while, then?"

Salinger nods as he rests his arms on the railing. "I can't accompany you. You go ahead."

I take a few steps in the direction of the escalator when a sudden thought crosses my mind. I turn back.

"Lin Sai-*ge*, what do you want to hear?"

Salinger is staring down at the piano when he hears that. He turns to look at me. The sunglasses are so dark that I can see my own shadow on the lenses, along with the blue, whitish sky outside the terminal.

"I'll think about it." Salinger's lips curl. "Go ahead and wait for my call."

"Okay!"

I think to myself, *Are you afraid that someone else will get to the piano first?* I take three steps in two and speed down the escalator, squeezing by when I encounter people standing side by side on the same step. Without knowing what I

am so happy for, I almost trot my way to the piano.

As I sit down, I let out a deep breath and glance back up. Salinger is typing something on his phone, the sleeves of his black shirt are half rolled up. The dive watch on his wrist gleams in the sunlight like a signal. My phone on the piano vibrates for a second.

Want to listen to "Gravity."

It vibrates again.

By LOTUS.

I stare at my phone, amused, but there really are quite a few songs called "Gravity." There is a fantastic guitar and bass duo in "Gravity" and I think he is gunning for that when he sends me the title of the song.

The black and white piano keys glow in the abundant sunlight. Playing the familiar intro, the sound of the music takes over the noisy world in my ears. Everything becomes simple again when I am playing the piano. But it is also not so simple, because it is for my idol.

He can't play, so he asks me if I want to. It actually meant, *"I can't play, will you play it for me?"*

Once, on our way back to the apartment from the company, we passed a newly opened piano shop. The Maserati was stuck in traffic and we both saw the nine-foot grand piano by the window on the ground floor of the shop. After the whole "It looks nice," "Want to go and see it?", "Well, let's go and have a look" exchange, we were parked and in the piano shop within minutes.

After getting permission from the person working there, Salinger sat down and played for a while; well, more than a while. Because he was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, and was playing Debussy rather than LOTUS songs, I didn't think he would be recognized.

At first, no one recognized him, though quite a few people were standing there listening—but they were just admiring the "classical prince who suddenly came to the piano shop." Later on, two girls entered the piano shop, whispering to me, asking if that was Salinger. I probably looked pained.

The girls asked, "We won't say anything. Can we take a picture with him? We love him so much!"

Her voice even went a little shaky at the end. I couldn't bear to say no, so I whispered, "Wait until he's finished playing."

At a time like this, don't interrupt him.

Salinger had no idea his fans were standing behind him. The two girls waited quietly until he finished playing. But apparently there were more than just these two fans among the crowd listening. Someone posted the address on Weibo, and within minutes the piano shop was swamped with people rushing to meet the celebrity. That day we had to cross the building from the second floor of the piano shop, escorted by the building's security guard, in order to leave.

Salinger was trending because he played this nine-foot piano that caused a traffic jam. Afterwards, Xu Zhang asked me, "How could you let him go in and play the piano? What were you thinking? Did you have any idea about his popularity?"

I asked myself the same question, too. The answer was probably because I had never heard him play the piano, I wanted to see the scene that made even Ms. Zhang think he was handsome. But naturally, I couldn’t say that to Xu Zhang. All I could admit was that I was negligent and careless, that I might have underestimated his popularity—not that I had.

Xu Zhang shook his head. “I really don't understand you musicians. It’s not like he doesn't have a piano at home. The company has one, too. So why does he just have to play everything he sees?”

I said because it was a nine-foot Steinway. Xu Zhang was almost glaring at me.

I just wanted to tell him why, but he probably thought I was being argumentative. I came to my senses when I got downstairs. He didn’t really want to know why, he was just complaining.

Even I was amused by this miscommunication. I guess I gave Xu Zhang-*ge* even more to complain about regarding musicians who don’t understand human speech but love to argue anyway.

A Steinway is not something anyone can play, let alone a nine-foot Steinway, though Salinger must have played it at Berklee. The most luxurious piano I’ve ever played was the seven-foot Yamaha at school, which may seem far removed from rock, but rock and classical music actually have a lot in common. Anyone who can play piano will not allow themselves to miss out on the allure of a nine-foot Steinway, with its ethereal highs and heavy lows.

The piano in the terminal is a domestic one, but it has a great timbre and touch, better than the one provided by the sponsors in the competition when I participated in years before. Salinger has a Steinway at home, but when a musician sees an instrument, they just can't resist playing it, especially if it looks beautiful, and it is put in a beautiful place. How can you resist such a poetic invitation?

The original guitar and bass ensemble in “Gravity” is quite soft, but the bass part of the piano is very different from the bass. I guess there is no need to imitate the same feeling as the original. After all, I am playing it for him. Salinger would not want to play a piano version of “Gravity” without any surprises.

If he were to play, what would he do with the bass part for his left hand?

The guitar that tumbles through the blue sky and white clouds, the bass that holds the guitar afloat like air must be pulled down by the piano. White clouds become white glaciers. Blue sky turns into deep blue icy oceans. There must be another gravitational force that can make the glaciers sink with a bang, making ice and snow erupt like fireworks.

Pianos can also rock. Any instrument can rock.

As my wrists lift from the keys, I can still hear the sound of the piano boiling cold in the spinning gravitational field. That should be…good enough, right? Have I played it right for you?

I look back with some nervousness to the second floor, where Salinger still stands, his hands on the railing now pressing against it. A beautiful piano spans his open arms. Everyone passing behind him is wearing the bright colors of summer, their pace brisk; only he wears black, standing still, focused like a piano. Those octaves are being held in his arms, but he will not give you any response unless you

play him right.

I am reminded of my experience at *"Super Sound."* Thankfully, Xiaochuan "played" Salinger on that day. Although it was rough, all he did was step on the pedal hard and slam the keys; still, in return, Salinger made a resolute sound like a Steinway, like a Besendorf.

At this moment, I am not sure what I expected from him. A thumbs-up or a round of applause for me? But I do not hear applause. When I look back, I see that there is quite an audience standing by the piano.

"Hey handsome, are you taking requests?" the short-haired girl leading the applause asks.

Just then my phone pings. "Sorry, someone has already requested a song!" I hurry and tell her.

The phone screen shows a "Bravo."

Another ping.

"Bonfire" by Nan Chi. You can play what they want to hear after this one.

It seems I am not particularly surprised that he has heard "Bonfire." I just feel an indescribable happiness in my heart, so I say, "Okay!" to my phone without thinking.

The girl who was trying to order a song teases, "You have a girlfriend listening nearby, don't you, handsome?"

I am quickly turning the rearrangement in my head, so I nod without thinking. By the time I realize and think *"Oh no, what am I nodding for?",* correcting it will only make it worse. I just hope it wasn't loud enough for Salinger to hear from a distance.

"Bonfire" is my song, so it is even more comfortable to play. With friendly strangers listening and someone special watching, the bonfire on the keyboard seems to blaze in this airport where people come and go.

People say, *"If God closes a door, he shall leave a window open for you."* I used to scoff at this saying, but now I am convinced. I've been chasing my dreams on my own since I left my band. All I had was my music, and now I have so much more than that. I know I have someone who cares about my music, someone who can inspire me when I need it, someone who is there for me when I want to indulge in music.

Amazingly, this person is also my idol. What more can I ask for?

TRACK 09

I feel a sharp pain in my ears as the plane takes off. It gets better when it is fully up in the air, but it is still accompanied by a subtle painful ringing. Sometimes when I swallow, my ears, my throat, even my nose click.

I've asked the doctor if it's okay. After all, I have to fly around a lot with LOTUS. And what a coincidence it was—I met the same doctor again, the one who was not gentle toward his patients with bad news at all.

"You tell me. It matters to people who value their lives, but it sure doesn't to those who don't." He glanced at me. "Which one are you?"

This doctor was a bit hard to read. Often when he sounded ruthless, the situation was not so bad. Besides, he gave me options. That should indicate it wasn't so bad.

"That means it doesn't matter—"

He glared at me.

"—Not too much, right?" I changed my wording.

"When did I tell you that's what I meant? Can't you just get a better job that doesn't involve flying?"

I said I'd already changed once. I'd already given up being a singer. I'd have to give up the dream of being a musician sooner or later; the remaining days were numbered. Asking me to give up being Salinger's assistant, too? That I simply couldn't do. The whole point of caring for my ears is to keep my music dream alive for a little longer. Wouldn't it be missing the point to stay away from my dream completely just to protect my ears?

The doctor sighed and wrote on his prescription pad and my medical record. "I've run out of ways to help you, kid. Do you still need me as a doctor?" He handed me the printed note. "In any case, just keep away from airplanes if you can find a way to travel by land. Can you at least do that?"

I took the note and the tension I had been holding inside eased. There were actually quite a few responsible doctors, but not many who understood their patients. As I reached the door, I couldn't help but turn and say, "Thank you so much for everything."

The old man waved at me to shoo me away, and I disappeared from his sight in a light mood.

I did not expect the large crowd of fans waiting for us at Tokyo Haneda Airport. The official website of LOTUS did not reveal the trip to Japan, so this must have been announced by SN. The fans are politely lining up on both sides of the aisle. Since they are not allowed to get closer, the screams are even more frantic. High and low voices from countless fanboys and fangirls form a staggered chorus. My ears are still unbalanced after the landing. With all the screaming I am hearing all of a sudden, it is too late to find the earmuffs in my luggage.

Hai-*ge* suddenly taps me on the back, I turn around to see him handing me a pair of headphones. What a lifesaver. I put them on right away as I thank him. Although the sound insulation is not as good as the soundproof earmuffs, the noise reduction is enough.

There are so many Japanese fans at the airport, and quite a few reporters, too. The screams of welcome continue all the way through. I walk ahead with the other assistants pushing the luggage, while the bodyguards expertly stand in formation around us to create a safe perimeter for the band walking behind. Even though the fans are well disciplined, no one dares to lapse in their work.

Although people always tease LOTUS about being an idol group amongst rock bands, their vibe is markedly different from an idol group. In the past six months, I've traveled with LOTUS everywhere, encountering fans going crazy and causing chaos at airports, but also heart-warming scenes of fans spontaneously singing in a group chorus. As an amazingly influential rock band, many admire LOTUS religiously.

Once on an online showbiz talk show, the topic of fan pick-ups was mentioned. A guest asked what might happen if a hit boy band and a rock band arrived at the airport at the same time. Who would win in this fight?

The host, a dedicated LOTUS hater, immediately said, "Boy bands have exclusively female fans, but 1U has a million-male cavalry. What do you think?"

"What's 1U?" the guest asked.

The host rolled his eyes. "The No. 1 band in the universe!"

After this, Ji Shi became labeled "the No.1 vocalist in the universe" by LOTUS haters. When the internet is full of haters joking about them being "the No.1 band in the universe" or "the No.1 vocalist in the universe," Ji Shi said this at a concert: "I thought this day was still far away. I didn't expect it to come so soon, so it's time to re-introduce ourselves. Come on, ladies and gentlemen, welcome our Space Guitarist Stone! Galactic keyboardist Li Xiang! Andromeda drummer Alan! And Black Hole bassist Salinger!"

Alan posed like a coquettish drama queen, but Stone didn't look too happy, nor did the leader Li Xiang. After all, haters came up with the name to mock their popularity.

"Apologies, Salinger." Ji Shi stepped next to Salinger and rested his hand on his shoulder. "I don't know that many galaxies, so you'll have to be the black hole. I think it's pretty cool. Do you like it? If you like it, you have to shout it out." He suddenly picked up the microphone to roar at the stands, "Salinger, DO YOU LIKE IT?"

The roar, along with the subsequent appearance on the big screen of the bassist and the black bass in his grip, pounded the fans like a punch toward the heart. Salinger didn't shout after Ji Shi, but he responded with a big slide on the strings. Ji Shi aimed the mic at his hand on the pickup and a beastly, roaring, heavy bass came out, ringing through 50,000 people in the stadium.

I think Ji Shi must have loved Salinger at that moment, because neither Stone or the leader would have played along. Alan would, but Alan always did—he loved to play, whatever it was. Sometimes Salinger's attitude could be really touching. With one arm around Salinger's shoulders and the other holding the mic, Ji Shi shouted to the sky.

"The No.1 band-"

The roar exploded like a thunderbolt, blasting far and wide into the crowd of 50,000 people, including me, who joined him in shouting “No. 1.” The chanting grew louder and louder. Even now, it still gave me goosebumps whenever I think of it.

Even Stone, who didn’t like the name at first, gladly accepted it. As a fan of LOTUS, it is a pleasure to think of how the host must have felt when he found out that the term had been accepted and claimed by the band!

As they leave the airport, they hear the fans behind them shouting out “No. 1 band” in Chinese with a heavy accent. Ji Shi, who has been keeping a poker face the whole time, raises his right arm toward the fans and salutes the crowd with hand horns.

Very dashing!

LOTUS is accompanied by quite a few people on this tour, from assistants to bodyguards. The Japanese company has arranged for a Mercedes luxury bus to pick us up. When I get on the bus, I take the headphones off to return to Hai, who freezes for a second and tells me, “They’re not mine. Salinger told me to give them to you. I don’t use such expensive headphones.”

I also freeze. They are black SN Frontier headphones. I actually did recognize them; I was just wondering how come Hai-*ge* used the same professional headphones as Salinger. Of course, Hai-*ge* wouldn’t buy such headphones; the phone he is using probably doesn’t have the audio driver. Anyone who chooses SN Frontier must have high demands for sound quality, and values powerful low-frequency performance. Of course they’re Salinger’s. Who else could it be?

Turning back to look at Salinger, who is sitting in the last row out of habit, his bass bag never leaving his side, I see him touching his neck after pulling out his phone as if he has just remembered he had given me his headphones, suddenly looking ahead. I catch his gaze and hurry over to him, handing him back his headphones.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, thank you!”

I don’t know what to say, other than thank you. Salinger’s thoughtfulness can turn a person into a thank-you machine. Salinger takes the headset and puts it back around his neck without saying you’re welcome or anything, as if it isn’t something that needs to be spoken about much. As he looks down at his phone, scrolling up and down to find a song, he abruptly looks up at me.

“What’s wrong?”

I realize I am still standing there in a daze as the car is about to start. “It’s just that… These headphones have really good noise canceling!”

Salinger looks at me without saying anything, probably not understanding why I am standing in front of him just to say something so unnecessary. Seriously, not even I understand why.

The driver is telling us all to sit down for the drive, so I go back to my seat. The soft touch of the SN Frontier ear cushions still linger on my ears. The headphones my *xuejie* used in the past also happened to be black SN Frontiers.

Those headphones that didn’t belong to me were special to me, because it was through them that I first heard the LOTUS bass line—like someone who had been

looking at the moon in the water and suddenly saw the cold, big moon overhead, with its powerful magnetic force that made your blood boil.

The first song I listened to through SN Frontiers was "Freedom," written and composed by Stone—which was already a very good rock song without focusing on the bass. But when I put on my *xuejie*'s headphones, I could not help but look up the song's arranger after only ten seconds. After "arrangement," it said "Salinger." The bass and ground drums intertwined like the vibrations of engines and sparks from tires as they chased the violins in the sky, opening and closing with gusto.
And *"Giant Waves,"* the song that made Salinger famous, didn't just take you through turbulent waves—the waves were mountainous and huge, with a heavy bass that gave you the illusion of falling and diving. It was a song that didn't give you a moment's respite; a powerful wave of bass that kept crashing over and shattering you as your nerves were wired by the guitar and electric. Salinger once said the song was inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's ukiyoe *"The Giant Wave"* and the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, both of which he indeed honored and paid tribute to with his music, impressing anyone who first listened to the entire piece with the sense of triumph that comes after a struggle.

Without a good pair of headphones, however, you may only hear the waves and not the giants, the old man and not the sea. Unfortunately, for most people, that is all they needed from music. Even now, when LOTUS is so successful and Salinger so popular, there are still only a few people who are willing to listen to the bass and arrangements seriously for him.

I remember when Fei-*jie* asked Salinger on the show if he ever wondered why he was so popular, to which Salinger said it was probably because he was tall.

Fei was right. It really wasn't just him being witty, it was confrontational—*You want to hear me say it's because I'm handsome; like hell I will.* More likely it wasn't even toward Fei. He was saying it to everyone—*I have nothing to say to the entertainment industry, where only looks matter.*

The car drives along the streets of another country. As my mind drifts away, Ji Shi, who is sitting at the front, suddenly gets up and heads to the last row. Salinger folds his arms over his chest, with his eyes closed and chin tucked. With his noise-canceling SN headphones, he cannot have noticed Ji Shi approaching him, but at that moment the car turns a sharp corner. The bass bag leaning on the back of the seat falls and crashes on Ji Shi's head.

I want to grab it, but the next second the bass bag is already caught and put back by Salinger, who even says thank you to Ji Shi. Ji Shi crouches on the ground, covering the back of his head and glaring at Salinger.

"Why don't you ask me if I was hurt?"

Salinger, still wearing his headphones, raises his eyebrows at him in confusion, eyes drooping.

Ji Shi sits next to him and pulls off his headphones. "Stop listening. I want to ask you something," he says, shoving something into Salinger's hand. "Help me check this out!"

I feel that it is wrong for me to watch, so I turn back. But my ears still catch their conversation.

"Are you serious?"

It sounds like Salinger looked at whatever it was for a moment before asking that.

“I can’t figure out how things got so explicit…” Ji Shi’s voice sounds full of confusion. “What do you think? Any suggestions?”

“I’ll get back to you later.”

The sound of paper folding.

“You can’t tell me now?”

“Your writing is so hideous it makes me carsick.”

“...Can’t you be a little nicer?”

“Why don’t you just say it if you do have feelings?” Salinger asks.

Ji Shi sounds a bit downbeat, which is a rare occurrence. “It’s not that simple. What if they don’t like me?”

“If people don’t like you, forget it. You think you can force someone who doesn’t like you to like you by doing all this?”

“Forget it? How could you say that?! Wouldn’t you feel awful if the person you love didn’t love you back…? Crap, Salinger, do you even have any humanity?”

“What are you getting all worked up for? I’m trying to think of a response.”

“So have you figured it out, you little liar?”

I am speechless.

“Write a song if you’re sad,” Salinger concludes.

“...I don’t think you’ve written any songs about heartbreak, breakups, or pining either, have you?”

“Yeah, I haven’t written any. Too many breakups to write about.”

Ji Shi sounds all choked up. “Okay, I’ll admit that you’re the expert in this. You tell me what I should do. I’m telling you with this person—even if they don’t like me, for once in my life, I’m going to have what I want!”

Salinger stays silent for a moment before saying, “Ask them to come to our concert.”

Ji Shi lets out a “Huh?” Sounding doubtful, he asks, “Will it work?”

“Works nine times out of ten.” Salinger says, “Now leave me alone. I need to get some sleep.”

“...You can fall asleep listening to rock?”

“It’s not like you’re singing it; why not?”

“...”

I am a little surprised. What Ji Shi just asked Salinger sounded like the same thing Alan asks Salinger about from time to time. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but when Salinger speaks, my ears just seem to instinctively catch his voice.

Ugh, what a lame excuse…

Ji Shi goes back to the front row. The back row falls back into silence, but it is as if I can still hear Salinger whispering in my ear, *"Ask them to come to our concert."*

Ji Shi shouldn't have doubted. Salinger was sincere when he said it.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

We settle in at the hotel, and the next day we meet the two maestro musicians we are going to record with. Probably because of Alan's teasing earlier, Salinger stands at the back in every meeting with Ryoko Nishino. He doesn't say anything that doesn't need to be said, aside from the simple self-introduction right at the beginning. But somehow, this makes Xiaoxiao excited.

"Do you guys think there's something strangely cute about this slightly shy and silent look?"

Julie observes Salinger for a moment and says, "I can see the silence, not the shyness."

Hai holds his forehead in disapproval. "I feel embarrassed for him when I see him being so attentive. He's a member of Asia's top band, after all. Can he not be such a manslut…?"

Naturally, he is referring to Alan.

Salinger is smoking outside the recording room when Stone comes out to remind him, "Don't be too dismissive!"

Salinger holds his cigarette next to his mouth and thinks about it for a moment. "I'll smile at her then?"

"Geez, forget it. Your vibe feels off when you smile. It's rare for you to be so free of earthly desires. Keep your arrogant persona."

"Hmm."

Salinger takes a drag on the cigarette as he leans against the window, going back to drifting off. Stone sometimes wonders about this—Salinger seems to be able to drift off at any given moment.

"Is it fun drifting off?"

Salinger points downstairs with his cigarette in his hand. "Do you see that stray dog?"

Stone looks down. "Yeah, I see it. What's wrong with the dog?"

"At first, he was lying in the middle of the road, completely motionless—not even responding when someone walked past him. I thought he was dead, but when I came out from the restroom, I found that he was still lying motionless, but in a different spot. I watched him for a long time and found out that he was sunbathing. He couldn't catch the sun from the spot he was at before, so he moved."

Salinger puffs on his cigarette, even the white smoke he exhales is wafting freely. "He's so comfortable in his own skin, this guy…"

"What guy? That's a dog." Stone shakes his head. "Rare for you to say this much to me, but it's all nonsense…"

The recording for the new album finishes in a week, followed by a fan meeting limited to 888 fans. SN is just testing the waters with the fan meeting, but their conservative estimation is clearly a bit too conservative. The tickets are sold out at lightning speed when the channel opens.

The fan meeting is due to start at 3pm, but just six hours before the start of the meeting, I encounter the biggest crisis of my assistant career: Salinger has disappeared.

Well, I can't actually say he disappeared. He left the door open when I called him for breakfast, but he wasn't in his room. There was just a note on his bass bag. *Out for a stroll, back later, don't tell Stone.*

I really thought he would be back later, so I didn't say anything and threw the note away for him, saying when asked that he was going to sleep instead of eating breakfast. Because Salinger often does that, no one noticed.

While eating breakfast with Xiaoxiao and others, I hear Xiaoxiao say, "Chi Nan, are you sure that Salinger is really sleeping?"

I nod with pretend calmness as I sip my milk.

"That's fine, then. That time in Malaysia, he left Siyi to go out on his own. He just left a note and turned off his phone. On the same day, there was a serial road collision. Siyi was scared to tears. Only in the evening did he come back in the rain. He even bought white chocolate for us, but who would be in the mood to eat it? We threw it all on him!"

My heart clenches. "He came back at night? When did he leave?"

"Daytime!" several people answer in unison.

Hai explains, "He got lost. It was a fan who led him back!"

Stone comes over with a yawn, asking where Salinger is. Stone nods when I tell him that he is sleeping, then looks back at me with a grin. "You don't have to be so composed even when you're having a meal!"

I am losing my mind! I call Salinger immediately after breakfast. Turns out he indeed had turned off his phone… This must have been premeditated, knowing that I wouldn't find him and would definitely look for his bass bag—so a note on the bass bag would be the first thing I'd see, and I wouldn't betray him as well! I drop to the floor, wondering if he is going to be led back by a fan this time.

I used to trust him so much. I thought he wouldn't lie to me even if the world was ending, that he would be the most reliable one, but it all turned out to be his tricks…

I check the time on my phone. He couldn't have run off too far, right?

I leave the hotel, too, in the desperate hope of finding him as I walk aimlessly. I take pictures of the hotel with my phone as I get further away. When I cross a few roads and turn back, the hotel is no longer in sight, but I can see a very tall signal tower. I take another picture of that.

No matter how far you walk, as long as you're in a place where landmarks can be seen, you won't get lost, right?

I have an idea of how he was dressed. Someone like Salinger is quite an eye-catcher, so I might be able to ask people on the street.

“Oh, yes, I saw this young man, wearing a baseball cap, tall and handsome, didn’t speak Japanese, had a bowl of noodles at my place, then went that way!”

I thank the noodle stall owner. If he had stayed here for noodles, then the distance he could reach in such a short time narrowed down even more. He might have even squatted by the side of the road to watch stray dogs sunbathing, which would narrow things down even further.

I walk straight ahead until I come to a crossroad. With a school on one side, he certainly wouldn’t have gone this way without being easily recognized, so I take the other way and glance back, the signal tower still faintly visible.

The sky is blue and the morning air is cool as occasional cyclists pass by on their way to work. I have studied a bit of Japanese myself, but I have never been to Japan and my impressions of the country were from manga and TV dramas. I wonder if Salinger has ever been to Japan; if he is like me, feeling both a strange and familiar sense with everything around him, the melodies he’d heard from his youth ringing in his ears every now and then.

The sparkling river was “*Kimi ga suki dato sakebitai (I want to say I love you out loud)”*, the lonely street lights were “Sekai ga Owaru Made wa (*Until the End of the World)”...*

A level crossing appears not far away. The bell warning pedestrians of an approaching tram rings as the gates drop to keep me on this side of the crossing. I am suddenly a little unsure whether I should have come out and look for him. Walking through this familiar and strange country, seeking out déjà vu scenes in every street and alley. How comfortable it must be to walk and stop when he wants to. This is something he can’t do back home.

Never mind, stop looking and trust him for once.

As I turn around, the train clanks by. It really does resemble scenes from Japanese manga. I can’t help but stop and think that it is just a pity it isn’t the season for…

Cherry blossoms…

The green train flies past and I freeze—there stands a familiar figure on the other side of the level crossing. He is wearing a black long-sleeved t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

Oh, yes, I saw this young man, wearing a baseball cap, tall and handsome, didn’t speak Japanese, had a bowl of noodles at my place, then went that way!

Before the gates of the level crossing are raised, I am already raising my hand. “Lin Sai-*ge*!”

It hasn’t actually been half an hour since I came out looking for him, but I have the illusion that I’ve been looking for him forever. The warning bell jingles again as the gates standing between us slowly lift one by one.

Salinger looks at me from afar, pulls down his cap, and strides toward me.

TRACK 10

THE moment I see him, I feel inexplicably excited, but then he comes over and I immediately start feeling guilty. Turning his phone off means he doesn't want to be bothered, but being found means he has to come back with me.

His trap doesn't work. As his fan, I should have jumped in but didn't.

"How did you find me?" Salinger comes over asking.

By this time, the sun is warm and the landscape around him turns to gold—except for his eyes, which appear dark in the small shadow of his cap.

I say, "I didn't expect to find you either. I was about to give up."

Salinger glances back to the other side of that level crossing. "To be honest, I saw you before you got to the level crossing."

"Huh?" I am surprised. *Then why didn't you run?*

"I wasn't sure it was you, though; maybe it just looked like you were lost in thought when you walked, so I thought I'd take a chance." He is still staring at the empty level crossing, like he is recalling. "If it wasn't you, I'd head over to the school to stroll around for another two hours. If it was you, I'd accept my fate and come back with you." He turns his head. "Looks like I'll just have to accept my fate."

If there is something in his eyes, there's not the slightest hint of blaming me. But still, the moment I see him pull out his phone and start to walk back, the sound of booting music blaring in the cold street, I am about to be floored by the guilt I feel inside. Why didn't I jump into his trap?

Ahead is the three-way crossroad we come from. Down to the left is the way back. Up on the right-hand side is the direction of the school he is going to, where a cherry tree stands on the campus, its thick branches poking high above the fence.

"Lin Sai-*ge*!" I call out to him.

Salinger halts in front, looking back at me.

I quickly catch up to him. "Lin Sai-*ge*, let's just split up here. I'll go back and wait for you. It's still early anyway, so you can still hang out for a while. I'll call you if anything happens."

Salinger stares at me, not saying yes or no. Honestly, he tests my heart the most when he doesn't speak.

I don't want him to feel like he owes me anything, so I leave a quick "be careful" before heading downhill on my own. I can't help but picture Salinger behind me. There is a dark green banyan tree by the side of the road where he stands. Would he immediately turn around heading in the direction of the school, or would he watch me walk for a while before leaving? If I turn back now, will I see the tree, or will I see the man…

My phone suddenly rings, so I assume it is Stone calling and fumble for it in my backpack, only to find it is Salinger. Puzzled, I look back upwards; he is still standing under the big tree uphill. Probably because I am looking uphill, he looks as uninhibited and casual as if he is standing next to his black Ducati.

The call is connected. Salinger lifts the phone to his ear.

“Chi Nan, I never thought of heading toward the school.”

His voice comes through the air and the phone signal at the same time, like he is talking to me in two dimensions.

Hanging up the phone, he strides slowly downhill, saying, “Come on, I’ll come back with you.” With a very faint smirk, he stops in front of me. “Unless you don’t want me to.”

And with that, he removes the trap willingly. From time to time, I often think to myself that this man is just mind-blowingly handsome, yet his gentle side is much more breathtaking.

On the way back, passing the stone bridge where I came from, the breeze blowing, the river dotted with broken gold, Salinger pauses to glance back at me. There are unspoken words in his eyes, but I cannot understand them. It is just a glance that shows a hint of regret, a glance that has dimmed before I can ask what’s wrong.

He turns around again with that silent regret still on his face, as if nothing has happened. Somehow, I become a little sad, as if the spotlight that cast on me a second ago has suddenly gone out.

It is only when we get off the stone bridge that I understand why he stopped. The chord of an acoustic guitar drifts in from somewhere, with a faint sound of singing.

I can’t hear the singing very well, but just by listening to a tiny section, I can recognize that unique and familiar chord progression. It is probably one of the most famous chord combinations in the world—“*Yesterday”* by The Beatles.

I’ve sung *“Imagine,” “Hey Jude”* and *“Let It Be”* when I was in a band, but never this one, “*Yesterday,”* even when asked—I can’t help but get teary-eyed just listening to Paul McCartney’s voice and the poignant guitar chords. It is one of those songs that you have to be very brave or very numb to sing without tears, because almost everyone who sings it is reminded of one of their most precious, yet never-returning, yesterdays.

I am not there yet. I don’t want to weep on stage. I don’t want to share that yesterday. I don’t even really want to hear anyone else sing it. But life always seems to have exceptions and impulses.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, wanna go have a look?”

He nods, as if he was waiting for me to ask him that.

Following the sound, we find an uncle sitting in a desolate corner singing to himself. The song has reached the last chorus and there is a lady of some age standing there listening, so we stay on our side across the stone path without getting too close.

Why she had to go

I don’t know, she wouldn’t say

I said something wrong

Now I long for yesterday.

The uncle's voice, like his beard, is rough around the edges, giving the song a very different interpretation.

I was five years old when my parents passed away in a car accident. The entire meaning of the song to me is my Granny, who was no different from anyone else's mother to me at five or six—she was so well kept that the slightest wrinkle was negligible. When she sat in my place in the classroom and attended parent-teacher sessions for me, I didn't feel like I lost anything.

I miss the days when she had just a few wrinkles and could carry me around. I wonder who that "she" means to this uncle. I can't tell if there are tears in his eyes because he is wearing sunglasses, but after humming the last "hmmm," his Adam's apple rolls, and he holds his guitar for a long time in silence.

Salinger is also quiet beside me for a long time, so quiet that certain scents settle in. For the first time ever, I smell faint traces of Davidoff on him before I realize that I am standing close to him, almost pressing against his shoulder.

The song *"Yesterday"* is magical in the way it seems to sing the story of everyone, connecting everyone in this world, high and low, of any color or religion, with great empathy.

The lady's husband calls out to her from far away. She pulls money out of her handbag and puts it in the hat in front of the uncle and hurries away. A boy is passing her with a guitar on his back; on closer look, I see that it is a bass guitar. The boy, who looks 17 or 18 years old, probably still in high school, runs over to the uncle, picks up a folding chair from behind him and sits down, smiling and saying something.

I try to make out what he is saying and hear, "Ojii-san, well done today. You managed to make this much without me!"

There is only one note that the lady has put in the hat. The boy secretly takes some change out of his own pocket and puts it in the hat, at which point I realize the man is blind.

With an acoustic bass backing him, the uncle starts singing *"Love of My Life,"* which is mostly backed by piano, which the uncle expertly adapts to his guitar. The boy's bass isn't very good yet, still only going off the root note most of the time, but he keeps his head down and is concentrating so hard that he doesn't notice Salinger walking past.

Not many male singers can manage this song, but surprisingly, the uncle can hit the high notes without losing the emotions. In this sparsely populated, cold, quiet old street, I am suddenly sorry that no one is here to hear him sing. If only they could have stopped to listen to this man sing, they would have felt that the day had become beautiful; that there was meaning in the long, mediocre hours.

The wide-brimmed hat on the floor is so old that the edges are worn out, and it sits collapsed on the ground. When I put money in, I quietly prop the hat up and it stands up a little, like a wilted weed woken up by the sun after a heavy rain. I feel as if I can vaguely see it and its owner in their prime days.

The boy looks up to say thank you, and when he does, the "*arigato*" dies on his throat. The uncle asks him what's wrong, and the boy stutters.

Salinger shakes his head at him, crouching to ask the uncle in English, “How many years have you been playing guitar?”

The uncle is slightly surprised to hear his voice. No one has ever squatted to talk to him like that, probably.

“Thirty years.” he replies.

“You play the acoustic guitar exceptionally well,” Salinger says. “It reminds me of my teacher.”

“You are too kind.”

Salinger asks, “Can I join you for one song? They all say I’m not too bad on the bass.” He turns around and winks at me with his right eye.

I immediately say, “Yeah, he studied bass guitar at Berklee and got invited to play in a local jazz band!”

It’s so much more than “not bad.” He’s amazing!

Salinger is kneeling on one knee the whole time when speaking to the man. I didn’t know he is the type to wink, even quietly giving me a thumbs-up from behind to approve of my supportive words. This looks a lot like when he first started, when he was still full of rebelliousness, but would turn back into a young student when he met the Godfather of Jazz.

Apparently, the boy’s English isn’t very good, as he keeps asking in Japanese if we meant to play in an ensemble. When no one answers him, he has to turn to me helplessly. Once he is sure that we are really going to play in an ensemble, he turns to the uncle excitedly.

“Uncle, trust me, he really plays the bass incredibly well!”

The man nods with a smile, standing up with his guitar in his arms. He bows slightly and says, “I would love to hear from you.”

The boy takes off his wooden bass and offers it to Salinger, going away to stay at a distance. Salinger sits down in his chair, then turns back to the boy.

“Stand next to me.”

His tone is rather cold, as if there is a hint of dislike, but the boy still manages to stand over with a flattered expression on his face, holding his head up like a soldier. I am both thrilled and crushed for him. *You weren't told to come over just so you can stand like a bodyguard. Learn from his bass skills while you can. It's rare that he’s willing to teach someone!*

If I had the chance to stand next to a twenty-one-year-old Salinger playing when I was seventeen, my stare would have beamed a hole into his hand.

“What's the next song?” Salinger asks the uncle.

Uncle thinks for a moment. “Is ‘*Straw Hat’* okay?”

Salinger seemingly freezes for a moment before nodding in silence.

The uncle certainly can’t see the nod, so I offer, “You may begin, sir!”

It is their first time playing together, yet the bass and guitar work very well together. This time, it’s finally not just the simple and rough root notes. The

changing bass ensemble dazzles the boy standing right next to them. The old man sings with relish and devotion, sometimes tilting his head slightly as if he wants to see the mysterious bassist, but unfortunately, Salinger doesn't look up once throughout, or he would have responded to the unseeing gaze.

My eyes even sting a little when it comes to the line "*mama, that old straw hat was the only one I really loved*." Halfway through the song, the old man plays an improvised solo, which the bass manages to play along with. When the song is over, I can see that he also wants more from this. He stands up and bows again in Salinger's direction.

"May I play another song with you, please?"

He is probably so happy he forgets himself and says it in Japanese. I hasten to translate what he means to Salinger. It is so rare that two strangers from different generations, who don't speak the same language but still admire each other, can meet like this.

For this next song, the old man asks Salinger to choose a song and he chooses Sting's "Shape of My Heart."

The old man says, "This is a great song and I'd love to sing it for you, but I'm not very familiar with the lyrics. Why don't you sing it and I'll play the guitar?"

Instead, Salinger says, "How about another song?"

The boy is a bit surprised, as am I. Salinger has fronted bands before. The difficulty of the song lies in the rhythm, I vocals are not too tricky. Salinger is recognized for his talent in rhythm. Even if his voice is not what it used to be, he is able to sing it.

"WhyIhe boy says. "I love this song! Let Salinger-*kun* just sing this one, please!"

He clasps his hands together toward me. These are words that don't even need to be translated.

Salinger looks up at him, and suddenly back at me. "You sing it, unplugged. It'll sound great coming from you."

The offer comes out of nowhere.

"Yeah! If Salinger-*kun* says you can sing well, then you must be great!" The boy has already excitedly fished out the tambourine in his bag, saying, "I'll be the drummer! Ah, it's so exciting to think that suddenly it's a band playing!"

I am a bit hesitant, but the word "band" is too irresistible. With a guitar, bass and drums, all that is missing is a lead singer to make a full rock band, so why should I be a redundant person here? I take off my backpack and drop it by my feet with a nod. I can't help but be excited, too. It is a band—a makeshift band that belongs to this very moment, to the four of us, and it feels so long overdue. I indicate to the boy that he can start.

Salinger presses on the bass strings several times, only to release it again. He apologizes before standing up, taking two steps forward, and squeezing my shoulder to make me turn around.

"I can't back you up if you sing to my face." His voice is right behind me, with a hint of a chuckle. "Your band should be behind you."

Perhaps it is because his mouth is exactly parallel to my ear level when he speaks and his voice arrives unobstructed, it actually sounds a little different than usual. It makes goosebumps rise on the back of my neck.

The phone in the back pocket of my jeans suddenly vibrates. Well, after hanging around all morning, news finally reaches Stone-*ge*, but Salinger gets ahead of me by pulling the phone out of my pocket to turn it off before putting it back, even warning me semi-seriously that this is "a singer's professionalism."

I'm sorry, Stone, but he's my idol. He knows too well.

In front of my eyes, there is just a cold, narrow street with few pedestrians. It reminds me of the day when I first performed on the street. I was a bit nervous at first, but the musicians were the backbone of the lead singer. With them behind me, I could shamelessly howl from sunrise to sunset. We were doing the coolest thing in the world, and whenever I turned to look at them in self-doubt, I could always see the support in their eyes.

Standing on a stage set up in the square, watching people walking in a numb trance, it made me wish I could shout the whole street awake, so I always sang hard. When I sang, I imagined I was an instrument. Good or bad, I was going to play myself until I burned to the touch.

The boy taps his tambourine three times, then joins in turn by the old man's guitar and Salinger's bass. In the hands of these two impeccable musicians, the sound of music transforms this summer street into a dreary winter all of a sudden.

"Shape of My Heart." The song is not about my heart, not the killer Leon's or Sting's. I am singing for the person backing me up on bass at the moment. This is a song Salinger chose for the uncle. It is also the shape of his own heart.

He doesn't play for the money he wins

He doesn't play for respect

…

It is not the kind of song where you can "play yourself until you burn to the touch," but when it comes to "that's not the shape of my heart," I can still feel the heat of the friction in my chest, still can't help but want to wake up this sleeping street, to send the singing further away.

The song has a harmonica section, which I hum through. In that moment, I feel the winter snow melting and the sunshine overhead. To have a moment like that in life, even if you can't achieve perfection, it is still worth the trip to this realm of the living.

Not many people stay to listen to us, only sparse applause from four passers-by after the song. I turn over to Salinger, who stares up at me, clutching his bass, not saying a word. I feel like a dumb kid who wants to be praised by his teacher. The teacher clearly doesn't want to say anything, but I still don't want to let go of every little expression in the corner of his eye.

"Wow, man, *ani*; you sing so well!" The boy keeps tapping his drum for me. "I can't describe it. Anyway, it was just…super penetrative!"

To be called "ani," older brother, just for singing a song, and to build such a deep, transnational bond—this is perhaps the beauty of music.

“Are you a singer?” the uncle suddenly asks me.

The question catches me by surprise. What should I say? That I used to be? But now…

“He is,” Salinger says.

He gets up to return the bass to that boy. My feelings are hard to describe. Whether it is to avoid embarrassing me or he genuinely thinks so, in any case those two words are…really rather sweet.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

It is getting late, so we say goodbye to the uncle. The boy comes after us, hoping to get an autograph from his idol. He spews words of admiration, speaking so fast some words are beyond my language abilities. Luckily, I manage to finish the translation with a little bit of guessing and adding, by empathizing with a fellow fan.

“Why did you skip school?” Salinger listens with a poker face throughout before asking him.

He says it in English, but the boy still doesn't understand. It probably isn’t just one or two days of skipping school, but a long history of skipping. The boy turns to me with an anxious “what does he mean, ani?” face, and Salinger raises his hand to stop me when I am about to translate. The boy stares at us with his puppy eyes.

“If you can’t even understand this simple English, how can you play rock ‘n’ roll?” Salinger turns to me again. “Translate it to him as it is.”

Then he walks away. After hearing what I interpret from Salinger, the boy is understandably down. He stands still with his bass in his arms, lonely as a telephone pole, when I catch up with Salinger. I feel a pair of eyes on my back as I accompany Salinger to a shop to buy cigarettes. As I expected, when I go to the door, there he is. The school-skipping boy is hanging around outside the shop.

He keeps me there to give me a whole speech. I get the general idea. He says he is not skipping school for fun—his father forbade him to play rock and roll, nor is he allowed to take piano lessons from the uncle, so he started skipping school out of anger.

“I just couldn’t stand the way he looked down on Uncle! You know ARMS, right? The teacher of the ARMS guitarist was a student of Uncle back in the day! If it wasn’t for Uncle’s eyes…”

I am astonished, too. ARMS is a very influential band in Japan, and has been around for twenty years now. There was a time when I used to listen to their songs a lot, but unfortunately, I missed their most active period.

“When did Mr. Shimokawa lose his eyesight?” I can’t resist asking.

Ono tilts his head back, thinking. “Quite early. Maybe when he was in his thirties, I think…”

That was almost twenty years ago…

“He’s remarkable still,” I say. “Didn’t he consider singing somewhere else?”

“I’ve heard from older people that this street used to be very prosperous years ago when there were a lot of people coming to hear Uncle sing. It's gone through a lot of rapid changes over the years. Uncle can’t see, and he doesn’t seem to want to go anywhere else.” Ono is getting more and more indignant. “I don’t understand why people say people like us can’t be celebrities. Who cares about being a celebrity? My dream is rock!”

Perhaps it is rare to meet someone who can understand him, so he starts confiding in me before he can catch himself. He is actually worse off than I was. Although my aunt and uncle also opposed me learning music or playing rock, for Ono, it is his closest and most important family members who have objected. That must have felt much worse.

“I’ve given up on getting that autograph, but I’m really not that bad of a person,” Ono whispers as he peeks into the shop. “I don’t want Salinger to dislike me, so please do tell him this!”

I agree. Ono nods and leaves, his back looking as lost as a buoy in the ocean.

“Ono!” I call out to him.

“Telephone pole-slash-buoy” turns back with confusion in his eyes, the same look I’ve seen in the mirror countless times, helplessly wandering between what I should and shouldn’t do, what I want and don’t want, why and how.

“He doesn’t dislike you,” I tell him.

He blinks. “Really?”

“Really. If he didn’t like you, he wouldn’t have asked you to stand next to him.”

Perhaps seeing my smile, he grins back. I know that Salinger couldn’t have disliked him, from the moment he sneaked money into the hat without telling the old man. I also know that, for the lost souls, just how inspirational the recognition of your idol can be.

When I return to the shop, Salinger is still waiting for the owner to split the change for him. Finally, it is all there, a big load of change, so back to the street we return. On the way, I tell Salinger what Ono told me. He listens and doesn’t say a word.

Uncle is not there when we return; only Ono is there to pack things. He puts the bass on his back and turns around to see Salinger coming. Salinger bends down and puts a handful of change into that hat. Ono looks at it, not daring even to mumble, standing in a daze.

Salinger stands up and asks me, “Got a pen?”

Seeing me hand the pen to Salinger, excitement lights Ono’s eyes.

Salinger rips off the pen cap, asking, “Where do I sign?”

I suggest, “On the bass!”

Ono nods. “Bass! Bass!”

Salinger steps behind Ono and lowers his body to start signing the lower half of the bass guitar. He doesn’t just sign his name—he also writes a message that Ono tries to peek at. When he turns his head, Salinger holds his head to make him look the other way.

Ono doesn't dare to peek anymore, so instead he keeps asking me, "What is he writing? It seems like he's written a lot!"

I have to say that he is writing a very inspirational message and that you will be touched when you see it. Even before he reads it, he is already very emotional, like a boy who is seeing the Grand Line.

I hope he'll still be touched when he sees Salinger's "No skipping school" on the bass.

On our way back to the hotel, we walk past the noodle stall. The owner lady just so happens to be taking out the rubbish. She sees me and smiles at me, asking if I've found the man. I nod and look ahead. She follows my gaze and laughs.

"Yes, it's him. The young man walks and eats like he's thinking about something else."

Because of the slight delay, Salinger is already ahead of me and has walked to the traffic lights ahead. There are just a few seconds left at the green light, and he walks with the crowd of people crossing the road. By the time I catch up, the light has already turned red. I can only look at his back on the other side of the road and sigh. He really is just walking on his own path; doesn't even bother waiting for others for one second…

I wait at the traffic light for half a minute. By the time he turns around, he would probably find that there is only air behind him. I watch him blend into the crowded streets of Tokyo and soon lose sight of him, so in my haste I shout, "Lin Sai-*ge!*"—but even that sound gets drowned in the noise. You can see how hectic Tokyo is; it only takes a minute before the street fills up again with people at both ends. The light finally turns green again, so I rush through the crowd to cross the zebra crossing, surrounded by unfamiliar faces coming and going. Suddenly my arm is grabbed as I try to go through the crowd in front of me. Startled, I turn to look—Salinger, with his hat down, looks at me in confusion.

"Where have you been?"

The second he appears, the passers-by on the zebra crossing stop having a thousand different faces and turn back into busy shadows. I am relieved and a little amused as I think, did he turn around only to realize there was only air following him, so he came back for me?

A couple of passing high school girls peer over at him, so Salinger lets go of my arm and lowers his hat again as he whispers, "You walk behind without a sound, like a ghost."

I tell him I am sorry, but I also don't know whether to cry or to laugh, thinking, *You're the one who's acting like a ghost. It feels like you aren't even walking, but floating.*

If he were walking like this at home, I wouldn't have had any trouble keeping up, but the crowds in this Asian metropolis are so huge—plus he walks non-stop, as if he has calculated his route through the crowds. Like a particle in Brownian motion, you can't predict the way he is going in the slightest. I am lucky he is tall, but if it were Stone, I'd either be drunk on the street now for losing my boss, or standing on top of the Tokyo Tower ready to commit honor suicide.

Tokyo is such an amazing city—busy, crowded, fast-paced, a city where dreams are pursued or broken, where even the inspirations that are born are full of dark humor...

“What’s on your mind?” Salinger asks.

I return to my senses. “Nothing, just...a melody popped into my mind.”

“You can write a song in your head while you’re following me all this way?”

There is nothing wrong with that, but when it comes out of his mouth, it sounds like he is that “troublemaker high school senior.” If this were a school drama, he would have said this as he held my head down, pressing it at the end with a “right?”

Before I can answer and before I notice, he is already several meters away again, waiting for me to keep up. I speed up to catch up with him, hearing him say as he turns around, “No wonder you lost me.”

Sighing, I laugh inside and think to myself, yeah, you got me.

“What kinda song?” Salinger suddenly asks, walking ahead of me.

I ponder, and those bits of dark humor pop back into my head. “Something like...the reflective journey of a salaryman.”

“Is this reflective journey of a salaryman funny?”

I haven’t even realized I’ve been grinning. Seeing him ask me so earnestly, with a hint of curiosity, it looks like I can’t help but oscillate between feeling guilty and amused considering the connection between the lyrics and him.

“You remember all the melodies?” Salinger asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ll write it down when we get back.”

“Let’s find a place to write it down now.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m getting a bit curious.” He heads for the square, keeping step.

We find a secluded bench in the square.

“Sit here to write, I’ll get us a drink,” Salinger says over his shoulder before making to leave.

“Lin Sai-*ge*!” I stand in fear. “I’ll go with you.”

Salinger stares back at me, his eyes inexplicably shrouded in the shadow under the sunlight. It is quite difficult to look directly into them. They make you feel as if he can tell what people are thinking.

“I’m really going to buy us a drink. My life is yours if I lie.”

He gives me a sincere look before heading off, leaving me speechless. All I can do is watch him walk away.

And just like that, in the lazy sunshine on the street of a foreign country, I open my notebook and write down the first 4/4 beat symbol. The seat on my right is empty, reserved for Salinger, but honestly, I don’t think I would have been able to write anything if he was sitting next to me. With such a great musician sitting next to me who is also my idol, it feels no different from a kindergarten kid doodling in

front of Van Gogh or Monet.

With the sound of pedestrians and traffic at a distance, I finish the song without any interruptions, quite literally in one go—including the main song, the chorus, and the disjointed lyrics haphazardly filled in. When I close the notebook to look up, I see Salinger walking back from not too far away with two drinks in his hand. Finishing the first draft of the song in the time it takes to buy two drinks, that definitely broke the record for the fastest I've ever written a song.

"Thank you, Lin Sai-*ge*!"

I get up to take the drink, only to find the paper cup all wet and squishy; it is clearly a cold drink, yet as I shake it, I can feel that there is no ice left in it.

I hold the cup in my hands, dazed for quite a while; Salinger has sat beside me and picked up the notebook.

"Mind if I take a look?"

I haven't even said so, but he knows I have finished writing.

"Well, I'd like to have your opinion," I say.

So, it isn't a new record for the fastest song writing at all—it is all this man's thoughtfulness...

He puts the cold drink aside as his fingers snap to the exact spot where I'd just pressed and flips the notebook open. I glance at the paper cups sitting between us. His is almost empty, I think. I can't see it, but I can feel it.

Inspired by my messy thoughts after losing Salinger, the song is the inspiring story of a poor salaryman who tries desperately to find his lost boss on the streets of Tokyo. After going through radio searches, seeking help from police officers, getting drunk in the streets and standing on top of the Tokyo Tower weeping, he finally gets his boss back.

I can't help but watch Salinger's expression, which as always seems emotionless, except for the lips that gradually purse as he flips through the notebook, the corners of his mouth finally stretching into a tiny smile as he reaches the last page.

"Is it really alright to have such dark humor in the lyrics and such a gentle melody?"

"Because the boss is found in the end," I say. "It's been tough, but it's still a story of survival. When you recall the incident, you feel like, well, fate has been kind to me after all..."

Sunlight pours down from the corner of a building. So cold and harsh is the light, it still melts when it spills through the leaves above our heads. The sky so blue, and the wind so soft, it is such a beautiful day. Even if something bad were to happen, it would be easily forgiven if it were to end well, right? I think this should be a song with just the guitar and bass guitar backing. It should be a song to make you cry tears of joy, one that gives you hope after listening to it.

"Have you figured out a name yet?" Salinger asks.

"Well," I cough. "The 26-Year-Old Boy in A Baseball Cap."

Salinger tilts his head to peer at me, quietly chuckling. "Have you ever thought about how your boss would feel when you write about him like that?"

The troublemaking senior spares me. He doesn't raise his notepad to slap me on the head. I give him an awkward smile, knowing he isn't angry. He probably…likes it somewhat, I guess?

"Can I edit it a little?" He holds up the notebook, asking me.

"Absolutely!" I hastily pass the pen to him.

Salinger stretches his legs, notebook in his lap as he starts to write. I am so curious to see what he will write, but he raises his hand and pushes my face aside.

"Just a little longer."

He doesn't look up when he does that, his palm touching my cheek all of a sudden. Despite it quickly snatching away and the fact that we are both straight, having my face touched by my idol still unsettles me. Perhaps because the cold drink has left his hand clammy, I feel as if I can feel the lines on his palm from his touch.

Yet he doesn't show me what he has written when he is done writing. He closes the notebook and tucks it straight back into my backpack, zipping it up.

"It'd be better if you read it when you get back."

It isn't long before the hotel comes into sight. Salinger slows his steps in a rare occasion. As we walk, he suddenly asks, "How come you speak Japanese?"

I tell him that I used to listen to a Japanese band, so I learned how to speak it for the purposes of singing, but I am only able to sing and speak a little in the daily context.

"Which band?"

I say ARMS.

"Is it exhausting to learn guitar, bass and Japanese all at once?"

"Well, I learned guitar and bass early on, but I taught myself Japanese when I was in a band." I say, "I started listening to ARMS because their bass lines are quite similar to what you write. They're all very melodic, but I always think it would be nice if they had a bit more rhythm. In fact, there are a lot of songs besides 'Giant Wave' that have great bass lines, like 'Nibelungen', which makes me think, well, the bass is as good as an electric guitar when it's arranged well..."

"Chi Nan." Salinger stops walking.

I realize I have inadvertently let so much of my feeling show. "Sorry, Lin Sai-*ge*. I'm bothering you, aren't I—"

"You're not bothering me," Salinger says. "But my ego will be inflated if you keep talking like that."

I honestly don't buy it. To me, Salinger is not the type who would ever have an inflated ego. He's had a lot of compliments over the years, and he is only going to get more and more. Anyone else would probably already have an ego inflated to no end, but five years into his career, apart from becoming more mature and stronger in will, he is still the same quiet, understated bassist. That hasn't changed.

"You won't," I say.

Salinger looks away as he walks on and says, “Stop talking about me. Let’s talk about you.”

I acquiesce, but I don’t actually know what there is to talk about.

“What kind of headsets did you use back in high school?” Salinger asks.

I chuckle and say I didn’t have much money back then, so just the headphones that came with my phone.

“Then you shouldn’t have had much interest in bass.”

I get his point. Although Salinger’s bass line is already outstanding, you can feel very little of the bass’s low sounds and rhythm without good headphones, especially since the tunes Salinger writes are much more aloof and avant-garde than those written by Stone. They are not as catchy and easy to remember. The charm of his songs is all in the wonderful arrangements and the genius control of the instruments as well as the feeling they offer the listeners. Without good headphones, it is hard to feel it, much less be interested in it.

I explain, “I knew a girl in school who is a huge fan of yours. She bought SN Frontiers just for you, just to listen to the bass line. I got interested in bass after borrowing her headphones.”

I still remember that day after school—I had just finished delivering food for the stall and was already twenty minutes late for my date with her. She didn’t answer any of my calls, so I thought she was offended and rushed to the park. She was sitting on the empty lawn at sunset. I called out to her, but she didn’t hear me. Instead, she suddenly fell headlong onto the lawn. I thought she had passed out due to hunger and ran over with my packed meal, only to see her still awake, hands on her chest, looking up at me kneeling on the grass next to her.

She said to me, “What should I do? I’m swooning from his bass line…”

She was talking about “Giant Wave.”

I laughed. “Is it that dramatic?”

She sat up and gave me the headphones. “Listen to it yourself!”

I took the brand-new pair of headphones and asked, “New?”

“Yeah, just listen to them!”

This was how I got to know Salinger for the first time. I was flipping through the lyrics book trying to find out who the arranger was, when *xuejie*, who was eating the packed lunch I brought along, pointed right at Salinger’s name like she’d had plenty of practice. I stared at the CD cover as if I had been reintroduced to this guy, who I thought was just a good-looking, cool-ish dude.

The headphones that came with my phone couldn’t convey the Salinger I was looking for, so I learned to listen with my ears covered—which was nothing like the quality of SN Frontier, but already it allowed me to capture as much of the heavy bass line as I could in the most mysterious yet most astounding of all LOTUS songs. It was a completely different type of vibration from the drums. Where the drums shook your eardrums, the bass heated your blood.

“So you learnt bass to win this girl?”

Salinger's voice pulls me back. I never really had that thought; I actually knew her before I was learning guitar.

Salinger nods. "Meaning you already got this girl when you were learning guitar." He turns back and raises an eyebrow as if to ask, "Is that right?"

"Barely...you can say that."

I mean, really, we only went on dates after school and on weekends. Instead of calling her my ex-girlfriend, I preferred to call her *xuejie*—even though I no longer have the heart of a teenager, she's still such an important person to me. Without her, I probably wouldn't be who I am now.

"Was that your first date?" Salinger asks.

"It was the first time we formally scheduled to meet somewhere."

"Then you should thank me. Without me, you would have broken up the same day of your date, being twenty minutes late."

That seems about right. I am seriously wondering if I should say thank you when I suddenly remember something fatal.

"Oh no!"

Salinger turns around. "What's wrong?"

I quickly pull out my phone. "I forgot to turn it back on..."

Just as I press the power button, the incoming calls bombard me with the ringtone, only to stop abruptly two seconds later. Someone shouts my name from across the road.

I follow the sound—Xu Zhang-*ge* is standing outside the hotel entrance, holding his phone.

TRACK 11

WHILE LOTUS is recording their new album, Xu Zhang and Yitian's representatives are at SN's headquarters talking to executives about the new contract. It looks like they are almost done, so he comes to the hotel to meet up with the band.

Perhaps because Salinger is present, Xu Zhang only says, “There’s a fan meeting in the afternoon. Where have you been?”

Salinger nods at him, saying, “Just went for a walk.”

Nothing more is said between them. Everything seems normal, but I know that sooner or later Xu Zhang will have to talk to me. I’d much rather he comes to me sooner, so I won’t have to worry about it the whole time I’m there. I won’t be able to eat well, or even sleep well, if he leaves it till tomorrow.

However, even on the bus ride to the fan meeting—not to mention dinner—Xu Zhang is sitting far away from me. Those two hours hang above my head like Damocles' sword, trembling, ready to drop any minute, but not doing so. On the bus, I stare at Xu Zhang’s back, in awe of his ability to put people on edge without saying a word.

“Why do you keep sighing?” Hai asks me.

“Nothing,” I say, “the AC is a bit cold.”

At 2pm, the whole crew arrives early at the venue for the fan meeting, where a Chinese-speaking host has been invited. There will be an hour of interaction with fans, with the remaining three hours mainly devoted to handshakes and autographs.

After hearing the arrangements, Stone complains, “Why not let us sing? It's not like we’re just debuting, we don’t need all these fan sessions!”

“Because LOTUS’s performance fees are high,” Li Xiang says. “It’s not like the Japanese organizers can make money from just 888 tickets. Show some understanding.”

Stone glares at Li Xiang. “How come you sound like you’re not a member of LOTUS? Besides, wouldn’t it be okay to let us sing two songs for free instead of having these stupid fan sessions?”

Li Xiang sighs. “You can’t just make it free by saying so. The company has to charge for it.”

“How peculiar.” Stone raises his voice. “It’s us who are singing. It’s the fans who want to listen. What has it got to do with either company? What’s this world coming to?”

He wants Xu Zhang to hear it, who is on the phone outside, and everyone knows that well enough to give Stone plenty of quiet space—but of course, Xu Zhang can’t possibly respond to him. He just walks a little further away, saying to the other side of the phone, “It's okay. It was a bit noisy earlier.”

Stone glares at the door.

Only then does Li Xiang add, “There is no sound equipment for a live performance. No one brought the drums and keyboard. If you want to sing for free,

then you're gonna have to ask Ji Shi to sing acapella. You want that?"

Stone glances at Ji Shi, who is playing a mobile game and curses.

"Shitty game! Did I not pay for this shit?"

He silently turns back.

Although there is a lot of resentment before going on stage, they can't take it out on the fans once they go on. These people are innocent, after all. The venue is small, and the stage is improvised. When LOTUS gets on stage, we are all offstage. I thought for sure that Xu Zhang would come to me now, but he doesn't even look at me when I cast my eyes at him several times.

I silently light a candle for myself, guessing that I really pissed him off this time.

One part of the fan interaction session is to have LOTUS answer fan questions collected on a board. As soon as the MC reveals the questions, there is a lot of screaming offstage. The five LOTUS members are left baffled onstage, as they can't read Japanese. I look at the question; it is asking who LOTUS would choose if they were to choose one of their teammates to be their lover, and asking them to confess their feelings to that person.

Xiaoxiao and Hai are giggling next to each other gleefully, while Julie shrugs, saying that they probably just took the question board from the ones for some other idol group.

Upon hearing the question, all five are showing a different expression. Stone looks as if the three-letters "WTF" are written on his face. The leader Li Xiang has a polite smile that says he has left the question on Read. Ji Shi is checking out his four teammates, clearly making his pick. Salinger, as usual, has no expression. If the light above his head were to dim just a bit more, he could have fallen asleep with his eyes open like a fish.

Alan looks around with a pained expression. "How can I confess to this lot? I choose death!"

The host suggests he can imagine them as girls.

Alan retorts, "How can I imagine that? I've seen them pee. Can I still imagine they're girls after that?"

The whole team is staring at him. Even Hai glares at him from below. "You're a celebrity now. How can you be so vulgar?"

The host asks the band to write their answers on their boards. The first guy who has his board turned over is the one sitting on the far left, Li Xiang. He turns the whiteboard over, on which is written Ji Shi's name.

There is a lot of suggestive "ehhhh" from offstage. Ji Shi holds his chest, acting flattered. When the host asks why he chose Ji Shi, Li Xiang tells him he is the only one he could imagine as a girl. The rest of them, he really couldn't.

Ji Shi puts his hand on Salinger's shoulder and says, "Come on, I'm the second tallest in the band. How do I look like a girl?"

The host comments, "Well, you do look like a girl when you're next to Salinger."

The fans burst into laughter. But Salinger doesn't laugh. He lets Ji Shi leave his hand on his shoulder as if he is Ji Shi's bodyguard.

"So then, a word of love for Miss Ji, please," the host teases.

So Li Xiang proposes, "Let's get married."

Screams fill the venue.

"What's all the shouting for?" Ji Shi points at him and warns the girls offstage, "Don't ever say yes to this kind of guy, who straight up asks you to marry him. Too unreliable!"

The girls answer "okaaaaay" in unison, so neatly and nicely it makes us all laugh, including those of us just standing by the side. I am still observing Salinger, whose expression remains still even now—except he lowers his head as he rolls his shirt sleeves up. I'm not sure if it is the heat or boredom.

The second person to be asked is Stone, who reveals his answer board. Surprisingly, the name written on it is also Ji Shi. The fans get even more excited. Ji Shi looks incredulous.

"Are you out of your mind? That's my name you wrote!"

The host asks, "How come? Do you all have a crush on him or something?"

Alan says, "You're overthinking it. He's just a habitual copier of other people's answers."

Now that he says that, I remember LOTUS was on a variety show where Stone also copied Salinger's answer. It was a question about women. After watching a clip, they were asked what brand of lipstick was shown. Stone copied Salinger's answer, but wrote "SLY" instead, which made the whole audience burst out laughing. The hostess asked Salinger what he thought of his "classmate," and he said to Stone, "Why didn't you trust me?"

Stone argued that the word was "sly," "But I saw that he had written 'YSL,' so I asked him if he wrote it wrong, but he told me to trust myself!"

The hostess laughed so hard and said, "You can't blame Salinger for that. He already let you see his answer; if you didn't trust him enough, then why bother to copy his?"

Hai also mentioned that Salinger really knew women quite well, not much worse than himself, the self-proclaimed bestie of all women.

"Once when Alan, Salinger and Stone were in a nanny van, the AC was turned on very low. When I went down to buy a cold drink for Alan, Salinger asked me to buy two cups of hot cocoa, one of which was for Sun Siyi. I realized then that Sun Siyi might be having her period. Salinger found out and couldn't explicitly say to bring a cup of hot water for Sun Siyi, so he asked me to bring two cups of hot cocoa. Because it was really hot that day and no one would possibly want to drink hot cocoa. Sun Siyi herself said that Salinger was so good that she sometimes didn't know how he found out."

It is impossible for me to notice a girl's period, but with Salinger's level of attentiveness, it is probably not impossible. I don't know why I suddenly feel a sense of loss, as if the secret happiness of being cared for by my idol is diminished by the fact that he treats everyone with such consideration.

There is a sudden boisterous scream. I look toward the stage to see that it is Ji Shi's turn to flip his answer board. The name written on his board is Salinger. I hear a lot of people shouting "Literature Couple" and get a bit confused.

Xiaoxiao explains, "Ji Shi's English name is Keats—as in John Keats. So, they were nicknamed the 'Master of Literature Couple'!"

You live and you learn…

The host asks, "You can't have chosen him just because he's handsome, right? Surely you're not that shallow."

"Am I that shallow?" Ji Shi echoes, then slaps his thigh. "Yes, I am!"

This joke, Ji Shi has made several times already. Next to him, Stone holds his forehead in despair.

"Why can't I choose him for his good looks? He's not only handsome, but he's got a good figure, too. If he were a girl, he would definitely be a supermodel, an 'oneesan', an iceberg beauty. Taking him out would be super impressive, plus he's talented and has experience with relationships…"

"Experience in what aspect?"

"All kinds of aspects," he says, suggestively.

Fans snicker offstage as they pretend not to understand.

"What about the love confession?" the host asks.

On the high stool, Ji Shi turns to Salinger, holding the microphone with both hands as he says melodramatically, "Salinger-*oppa*, *aishiteru*[19]."

"Salinger-*oppa*, don't you have anything to say?"

Salinger picks up the microphone. "I've been meaning to ask this since earlier. What's going on right now?"

Next to him, Alan nudges him. "What's going on with *you*? Holy shit, are you a fish that can sleep with your eyes open?"

He was not sleeping; he was just in his own world. For someone who can eat and walk absentmindedly, you can't really expect him to listen carefully to everyone's chatter in a session like this.

The host repeats the words and asks Salinger who he wants to confess his love to. The bassist on the high stool hugs his knees, scanning his teammates before saying, "Maybe Stone."

Stone almost jumps up. "Salinger-*oppa*, I beg you to leave me alone. That's a lot of pressure on one man!"

"Why did you choose him?" the host asks.

"He's a good guitar player."

"And how would you confess to this…er, girl who plays the guitar well?"

Salinger turns his head to look at Stone, contemplative. Ji Shi, who was sitting in the middle, has the good sense to move back.

Stone covers his face as he quips, “Holy shit, don’t stare at me like that. I’m getting goosebumps!”

But Salinger just has a habit of staring at people when he thinks, and his gaze has the fans wait in bated breath. Salinger suddenly says, “Let’s start a band together.”

He doesn’t even take the microphone. He just says that, not even all that loudly, but we all hear it. It is translated for the fans by the MC. There is a small commotion offstage. Stone looks stunned. Even though he is gaping, I think he is touched by the words. Even I feel like my heart was instantly hit by electricity right at that moment.

Perhaps it has something to do with Salinger’s deep voice, with his tone. When he says things that have to do with the band, with rock, with music, his whole being always radiates phenomenal sincerity and endless charm.

Stone lifts the microphone, and speaks over the screaming. “Honestly, amongst so many confessions, I only buy his. It’s super convincing. If a girl really said this kind of thing to me, I wouldn’t care if she’s had a hundred boyfriends before, I’m in this for her!”

“Thanks.” Salinger bows to put the useless answer board aside, this time not forgetting to take the microphone.

“But what about you?” Stone probes. “Would you really fall for someone just because they play guitar well?”

“Of course not,” Salinger says, “but if they play the bass as well as I do, maybe it’s possible.”

“No female bassist like that has been born yet, most likely,” Stone jokes.

“A man also works.”

Great. Now the audience just explodes.

As if hearing a shocking secret, an excited Alan asks, “Wait, are you implying that you’re bi?!”

“Why do you believe whatever joke I tell?”

Alan mouths a *fuck*. “Because you sound so serious every time!”

Even the host is impressed, saying in awe, “Wow, now I see why Salinger is so popular among female artists! This kind of confession really hits a soft spot!”

Hai sighs next to me. “This Japanese host is so good with his words, turning ‘sleeping around’ into ‘so popular among female artists.’ Impressive!”

I laugh. He’s right. We *should* be impressed.

After the fan interaction, it is time for the handshakes and autographs. Since LOTUS has not officially released any records in Japan, the fans have brought CDs, concert DVDs and other stuff that they bought overseas. Although there are fans that have traveled abroad to see LOTUS in concert, for most of them it is the first chance to see their idols after five years. In the handshaking and autograph session, the fans, especially the fangirls, inevitably talk a lot when they approach the stage—but the Chinese-speaking MC has already left, and the interpreter is not there for this session, so with my broken Japanese, I sometimes have to interpret for Salinger. Li Xiang and Ji Shi, who are sitting next to me, occasionally ask me questions too.

Before I know it, I have taken on the responsibility of interpreting for the whole band.

It was supposed to be a simple handshake and autograph for each fan, but now that the fans find out someone is interpreting, everyone is saying so much at once that I struggle to translate the whole thing, so eventually I omit the paraphrasing part and just say whatever the fans said.

--Ji Shi-kun, I've been following LOTUS since your first album. I really like you!

--I went to Madison Square Garden to see your concert. I loved your live show, and I'll never forget the last chorus!

--Salinger, I love you so much! I'll sing all the songs you write. Please come to Japan for tours, please!

It all boils down to "like you," "like very much," "love you very much." Occasionally they mention when they started to like the band, or the fact that their own family and friends also like the band, the first album they listened to, or tour they had gone to… To be honest, I am lucky this is all they are saying. Occasionally there is stuff I don't understand, but as a fan myself, I can empathize, connect the keywords, and guess roughly what they mean to say.

In the end, all I can remember is standing behind five people, interpreting "*suki*" and "*daisuki*" in various accents back and forth so many times that I barely recognize the word "*suki*" afterwards.

Halfway through, the staff who have been keeping the place in order, come to usher the fans back into a neat line so I am able to catch my breath before turning my head to see Salinger looking at me with a pen spinning in his hand. His gaze is very direct and he won't look away just because your gazes meet. I go back behind him. He stops spinning the pen then. He taps it against the table, and it is back in his hand. I feel inexplicably relieved that, after all, I am his assistant and must return to my place after helping.

At this point, the reformed line moves forward again while Alan calls out to me on the other side, "Chi Nan! Chi Nan! Over here, over here!"

Alan is the first at the signing table, so I am about to go over to help when Salinger suddenly turns and grabs my arm.

"You stay here."

The message in his eyes is clear. It isn't up for debate, so I nod. Alan is already ranting about Salinger being stingy.

I still translate for the guys where I can, but not for Alan and Stone, who are too far away. I can almost sense that he doesn't want me to leave my spot behind him. Although with fan after fan, he doesn't really have much chance to look back to see if I am still standing there.

The next fangirl is calm at first, but when the signing is done and Salinger raises his hand to shake hers, the calm before the storm finally breaks as the girl holds her idol's hand in both of hers and bursts into tears. She speaks with little sobs, so I have to listen carefully to make out what she is saying.

"...Thank you so much for coming to Japan. I thought I would never get a chance to see you in my life because I might not get a chance to see you in China. I have

very serious flight-phobia…"

When I reach this point in my translation, I am a little surprised myself, and glance down at Salinger. All I can see is his black hair and his usual calm face.

"It's pretty amazing, actually. When I'm sad or feeling like I can't get through this, as soon as I listen to your music, even if I only half understand the lyrics, I feel better. Your songs just seem to have that magic. Although for you this is the first time we've met, for me you're someone very, very special! Please do take care of your health, stay up less and smoke less!"

I guess Salinger is surprised, too, because in public or the media Salinger has not appeared as a smoker. I only found out that he smokes from a documentary when the five members were having dinner and the camera just happened to capture in passing Salinger's cigarette pack on the table. Him staying up late has only been mentioned by teammates in the documentary. The fact that she knows this means that she really takes everything about her idol to heart.

A staff member is urging her to move on, so the fangirl shakes Salinger's hand one last time, saying, "I love you so much. It is really a blessing to know you in this world!"

I have said "*suki*" a million times already, but I somehow get stuck on this one. Salinger glances back at me.

"She said she loves you a lot and is blessed to know you in this world," I say.

I can't explain why I got stuck on the "I love you" and why the switch from first to third person pronouns. It seems suspicious and deliberate.

Luckily, Salinger doesn't seem to think anything of it. He turns back as soon as I finish.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

After the fan meeting, finally Xu Zhang comes to me. I am alone in the break room packing my things and the sword of Damocles just falls out of the blue.

Xu Zhang asks me where I was for so long during the day. I tell him I was just on a walk. I have to stick to our lie and keep it consistent. Plus, we *did* just go on a walk.

"Then why did you turn off your phone?"

I lie and tell him that my phone was out of battery.

"Then you should have asked Salinger to turn his on."

"Sorry, Xu Zhang-*ge*. It won't happen next time."

Xu Zhang shakes his head, clearly not ready to end the conversation like this. "Two hours for a casual stroll? If it was just twenty to thirty minutes, I wouldn't be coming to you to say anything. I get Salinger. But *two hours*. If you were following him, you could have brought him back at any time. Why did you let him wander the streets of Japan for two hours? Chi Nan, do you remember the last time you caused a riot at the piano shop? I don't care if your phone is really out of battery or not. You as an assistant must keep your phone on twenty-four hours a day. If something happened to the two of you out there, what was I going to say to Stone? To the

company? To the fans?"

There is not much I can say at a time like this, other than accepting blame modestly. He is the agent. He is in a different position. His worries aren't unreasonable. It is my fault for forgetting to turn my phone back on.

"Chi Nan," Xu Zhang sighs. "I think you might not be right for this job—"

"What are you talking about?"

Salinger has come through the door. Xu Zhang is clearly frustrated as he puts his hands on his hips, but he doesn't snap. He just says with anger, "Nothing, just a casual chat."

He turns to leave, and Salinger stops him to say, "I turned off his phone."

It is not wise to say that. I look over at him.

"...Fine." Xu Zhang bites back his anger. "It was not enough for you to turn off your own phone now; you've taken to turning off others' phones."

Salinger glances at me and says, "I crossed a line. It won't happen again." Then, he says to Xu Zhang, "I hope you didn't come for a 'casual chat' with him over this, Xu Zhang. You are the agent and have the right to interfere in things regarding my assistant, but after all, he didn't sign the contract with the company, he signed it with me. If you have anything to say in the future, talk to me directly."

With a pained expression, Xu Zhang pulls open the door to leave, but then turns back once he gets to the door. "Well then, I'll come to you and say that I won't mess with this assistant of yours, but for the convenience of work in the future, I'll have the company arrange another assistant for you."

"No."

"Men are never as attentive as women."

"I said no," Salinger says. "Are you not satisfied until you see a female assistant causing some trouble with me?"

Xu Zhang ponders for a moment. "This time I'll arrange for a married, experienced female assistant."

Salinger shakes his head. "That's even worse. I'm a man surrounded by gossip who has fired two female assistants for no apparent reason. What man would be willing to let someone he loves come to me? Would you ask your fiancée to work with me?"

Xu Zhang glares at him. "Salinger, you make things sound ugly sometimes."

"You're too kind. I make things sound ugly all the time."

Alan shouts from outside, "Salinger? Handsome Sai? Where are you?"

I wish Alan could just kick down the door. There is absolutely no room for me as an assistant to interrupt the confrontation between these two.

Salinger stares at Xu Zhang, who is standing in the doorway and not letting up. "Here!"

Alan shoves in and almost hits Xu Zhang on the back. "What's wrong? We're heading off to taste some kaiseki-ryōri!"

Xu Zhang doesn't say a word before heading out.

During dinner, even Stone can see that Xu Zhang and Salinger are at odds. They don't sit together even when there is clearly space, so Stone pulls Xu Zhang to the other side of the table.

The assistants sit at another table. During the meal, I ask Hai if Salinger and Xu Zhang have always been like this. Hai tells me that, in fact, everyone in LOTUS except the leader has messed with Xu Zhang a few times. Stone even flipped a table and smashed bottles with him. Alan has also often talked back to Xu Zhang.

"Stone did what?" I look at Stone in disbelief. He is toasting Xu Zhang at the other table.

Xiaoxiao nods as she eats. "Once, Xu Zhang arranged to buy an award for our band; one of those music awards. The company paid for it. Stone was furious and flipped the table the moment he found out!"

I listen to the animated Xiaoxiao and Hai telling me about the scene. I think it was the second year after LOTUS's debut. It was an award at some entertainment gala—I remember it now and incredulously look back at Salinger. *It was bought?*

The band had to go up and accept the worthless award. Stone kicked the table right there on the spot and swore at Xu Zhang.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Get this award if you want to, but I'm not going!"

Xu Zhang wanted Li Xiang to accept the award and give a speech, but the whole band had to go on stage, Stone violently refused.

"I can't take a fake award. I'm afraid I'll slam the trophy on the floor if I receive it!"

Xu Zhang retorted, "You are the main composer. You don't have to give a speech. You don't have to touch the trophy, but you have to stand up there—otherwise, what will people think?"

For the sake of the band's reputation, Stone eventually compromised, walking the red carpet and accepting the award on stage with a stinky face. He got made into a meme. People mocked him for thinking he was a big shot just because he won a shitty award. I feel sorry for Stone; I guess there was nothing he could do to clear that misunderstanding.

"Everyone was upset about that award, right? Ji Shi and Salinger were also unhappy, but what is done is done, so not going up on stage to accept it would expose their shame," Xiaoxiao says as she eats her beef.

Stone compromised. Xu Zhang comforted him a bit after that, saying that this was a showbiz routine, telling him to just imagine that it was just a regular event and not to feel any emotional baggage.

After accepting the award, they were invited to a cruise after-party by one of the organizers. The band was not in the mood to eat, drink, or have fun at all. They locked themselves in the room in mourning and in silence.

As soon as Xu Zhang left, Stone swore. "So this is how awards are won?"

Meanwhile, Alan, sitting in the corner, suddenly burst into tears. Stone patted him on his head, saying, “What’s the point in crying?”

But tears welled up in his eyes, too. According to Xiaoxiao, everyone wept that day in frustration. Only Salinger smoked quietly alone. He pulled out a big wad of tissues from the table and handed them to Alan next to him, telling him to pass it on. Alan handed the tissues to Ji Shi, who was in tears, who in turn handed them to Stone, who handed them to Li Xiang, whose eyes were wet but who had yet to weep.

After a while, the tissues ran out, so Salinger told them to cut it out. “I’ve had enough of four grown men crying in front of me.”

Alan sobbed, “If you had four women crying in front of you instead, you’d be able to put up with it, right?”

Stone said, “Get out if you’ve had enough. Who says I want to cry in front of you?”

On the couch, Salinger arched his back in deep helplessness, propped his hands on his forehead for a long time, cigarette ashes dropping on his right hand. Then he got up with a sigh. He took the trophy from the table, went to the small balcony that looked over the deck, and tossed it straight into the sea!

Now the whole room was silent.

Someone on the deck downstairs shouted, “Something fell into the water!”

Naturally, no one in the room made a sound. It was as quiet as a murder scene.

Salinger said, “What? Didn’t you not want it?”

Everyone remained silent until Salinger said, “Forget this award. Next time we’ll win a legit one. Which one do you want?”

Stone answered, “The most prestigious one.”

Li Xiang chose, “The Pop Music Society Award.”

Ji Shi said, “Let’s start with Best Band, then!”

Alan replied, “I think Most Popular Band would be better.”

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Xiaoxiao holds her chopsticks in her mouth as she says adoringly, “Ugh, it’s a pity you weren’t there; my Sai Lin-*oppa* was so cool that day!”

“That’s why Xu Zhang-*ge* is a tough one to deal with.” Hai lowers his voice. “Stone and Alan will eventually compromise, but not Salinger. Luckily, Salinger didn’t insist on not accepting the award. If he insisted on not going, Xu Zhang would have had to go and accept it himself.”

According to Hai, there was an incident later when a new LOTUS song was to be the EP of a TV show that was adapted from a very famous plagiarized novel. The author was a habitual plagiarist who had ripped off many works, including domestic web novels—even foreign novels. Even an outsider like me heard about it. When Salinger didn’t agree to do it, Xu Zhang found it strange that he would agree to accept a fake award, but not this. It made no sense.

Xu Zhang said, “Even the director and actors weren’t afraid to shoot the film. What are you afraid of?”

“What am I afraid of? I’m disgusted. Even if it wasn’t plagiarized, I wouldn’t want to give the song to such a badly shot, trashy film.”

Alan interjected from nearby. “You can’t know if a film sucks until it’s aired, can you—”

“Zip it.”

Alan kept quiet.

Xu Zhang said, “You are ridiculous. You don’t get a say on this.”

Salinger said, “It’s not like you’re writing the song. If I don’t get a say in this, why do you?”

Xu Zhang was furious. He said harshly, “Salinger, we can’t work with you like this. Sooner or later, we will run out of income. You have to adapt to the entertainment industry!”

“I’ve never been afraid of that; you can’t threaten me with it.” Salinger said, “You’re the one who has to adapt to the music industry. What do you think you are? The agent of some idol group?”

Hai is rubbing his arms, looking at the two people who seem to be at odds with each other at the table over there. “Holy shit. Those two are so scary when they fight. They don’t argue out loud. They just throw cold daggers at each other. The place is just frosty!”

That day, Xu Zhang had said, “Fine, then we’ll vote anonymously. I won’t vote. The whole band will vote and decide.”

Salinger said sure. It was a tough move; after all, Salinger couldn’t guarantee that everyone in the band was on the same page as him.

When it was time to start voting, Xu Zhang asked everyone, “Please think it through. Playing the theme song for a popular TV show doesn't mean endorsing the show. No one would blame the band. Even the best songs need a chance to be heard.”

Salinger simply said, “I dare you to vote yes.”

I am stunned.

“Yeah, I had the exact same look on my face!” Hai says. “Salinger looked so domineering! In the end, the whole band voted against it. Can you imagine what Xu Zhang’s face looked like when he found out?”

Well, I can see where the beef between these two came from now, but that is just as I expected of my idol. He will never give in on matters of principle. Honestly, I wouldn’t be willing to let my song be tied up with a shitty plagiarized drama for a billion dollars, even if it could be heard by all the people on earth. It would be a shame that whenever anyone mentioned the song in the future, the image of the plagiarized drama would pop into mind.

It isn’t until that evening that I have time to open the notebook. Sitting in bed after my shower, I open it with slivers of excitement. Looking at it closely, Salinger

modified very little. He added a bridge between the third last and the second chorus. I always felt that the three iterations of the chorus were missing something in terms of emotional progression. There should be a bridge section here, but I didn't think of it at the moment. I had no idea he'd just added it for me.

The bridge is melodically powerful. The lyrics nailed it. The final two repeated choruses are made more powerful by this bridge build-up, creating not only more vocal possibilities, but also more ways to experiment with the arrangement.

Another change was made to the melody of the first and last lines of the chorus. I sit on my bed for a long time thinking about it, but I still don't understand why it was changed. It seems that only two phrases were changed. The key of the chorus remains intact, so what is the point?

I go to bed, turning the lights off, but after a while I still can't figure it out, so I sit up again, turning the lights on as I decide to sing it from beginning to end. First, I sing it according to the original score. The second time I sing it carefully according to his modified score. I sing it carefully, fearing that I won't be able to appreciate the meaning of those two lines he'd modified, but as soon as I get to the first line of the chorus, it dawns on me.

There is nothing profound about it. It was just a change to make it more comfortable for my ears. He replaced the higher-pitched chorus with a softer melody and when I sing the three choruses again, my ears barely feel the pressure of the resonance. And if anything is missing in the emotional build-up, he has already doubled it with that bridge.

It is the same feeling as the time when I got the headphones handed to me by Hai at the airport, but that was just Salinger's universally applicable consideration and attentiveness. I smile bitterly as I close the notebook and suddenly notice something else written on the next page.

It is Salinger's handwriting.

When you sing it, save it as the ringtone for your boss' phone so he won't get lost again.

--from the 26-year-old boy in baseball cap

Even though it was only his universally applicable attentiveness, I still feel in this moment that little bit of special treatment from Salinger that I get probably just because of my proximity to him.

As my idol, he has given me all he can—inspiration, motivation, a role model. So why should I expect him to give me unique attention? How tired would the idol be if every fan thinks that way?

Turning off the lights and lying on the bed with my hair still damp, I put my hands behind my head out of habit, the way I used to as I lay on campus grass, the neatly mowed lawn radiating the smell of youth. The blue sky and white clouds back then were all exceptionally wonderful.

The arrangement is already starting to take shape in my head. Accompanied by silent guitar and bass, I can again see the shadows of busy commuters walking in a crowd at the wide crossroads of Tokyo, Salinger standing at the end of the zebra crossing, pulling down his black baseball cap. He is glancing back, as if asking me whether I want to follow them or go with him.

□□□□□□ (You told me you were just going to)

□□□□□□ (The cold drink shop round the corner)

Again

Again

Just another lie

□□□□□□ (Following you)

□□□□□□ (How easy and difficult)

My boss

My bread

Now I'm in hell

Where are you my boss

□□□□□□ (Please don't turn off your phone)

Where are you my bread

□□□□□□ (You forgot your baggage)

□□□□□□□□ (You said we'd be together)

□□□□□□□ (Together to the destination)

□□□□□□□□□□ (Is that a promise or just words)

□□□□□□ (Radio in the park)

□□□□□□ (Calling you non stop)

□**い** (Black)

キャップ**の** (Baseball capped)

26 □**の** young man (26-year-old young man)

□□□□□□□□□□ (Hoping they can bring you back to me)

But police are no superman

□□□□ (In the end I’m still)

□□□□ (Singing to my wine)

Singing alone

Where are you my boss

□□□□□□ (You’ve been plotting)

Where are you my bread

□□□□□□ (Losing to your whims)

□□□□□□□□ (At the top of Tokyo Tower)
□□□□□□□ (Watching stars crossing the sky)
□□□□□□□□□□ (Wanna fly to the edge of the dark sky)

□□□□□□□□□□□ (I'm just a human with no wings)
□□□□□□□□□□□ (Bound to walk on this boiling earth)
□□□□□□□□ (I lost the treasure in my arms)
□□□□□□□ (I could only run and look)
□□□□□□□□□□ (Until goodbyes and move on)

□□□□□□□□□□ (Lost dreams are never found again)
□□□□□□□ (But life goes on)
□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Everyone tosses away and forgets)
□□□□□□□□□□ But if we all do forget
□□□□□□□□□□□□□ Why do we always think of those dreams
□□□□□□□□ When we're vulnerable and helpless

Where are you my boss
□□□□□□ (Sing your favorite song)
Where are you my dream
□□□□□□ (Even if it's far away)
□□□□□□□□ (The old guitar tossed on street corner)
□□□□□□□ (Back in my arms again)
□□□□□□□□□□ (Wanna hug the 16-year-old me)

□□□□□□□□□□□ (I see those touched looks)
□□□□□□□□□□□ (I see once insistent eyes)
□□□□□□□□ (I see day after day)
□□□□□□□ (Our Rendezvous with the Sun)
□□□□□□□□□□ (Behind that light is the you I want)
Welcome back my boss
Welcome back my dream
Welcome back my life

TRACK 12

AFTER returning to China, LOTUS has some time to catch a break as they wait for the new album to be processed and released. There are few singers and musicians who can still release physical albums nowadays without losing money. Because a lot of high-quality digital audio can already reach a sound quality comparable to CDs, purchasing CDs is just a sign of support from fans to their idols. Perhaps because of this, the decline of the physical albums has had little effect on the top band. Their huge fan base allows them to easily hit number one in physical album sales. They earn a profit for the company that is no less than it was two years ago.

We are given some time off as assistants. Whilst on break, I am working on the arrangement of the new song. It isn't difficult to use an acoustic guitar and acoustic bass to accompany it. I don't feel like doing it on a synthesizer for this one. I have to play it myself to get the feel of it, but then it means that I can't skimp on the recording, so I have to find a studio to make it work.

There is one more thing that is tricky—Salinger wrote that bridge. How can I credit him without looking like I'm using him to hype my song?

Something flickers out of the corner of my eye; it is the lit-up phone at the bedside. Wondering who it can be at this time, I reflexively scan the time at the bottom of my computer screen when I pick it up and see Salinger's name. It is 11:30pm. If he's calling me at this hour, does that mean it is an emergency?

"Hello, Lin Sai-*ge*?"

"Are you free now?"

"Yeah."

That is the question, but it doesn't sound like it is urgent.

"Come over for a bit, then."

"Oh, okay." I check the time again. "I'll be there in half an hour!"

I hang up and change my jacket in a hurry. Just before I leave the house, I realize I didn't even ask him what it was about.

After I get down, I run into the owner of the Japanese restaurant, who is carrying ingredients to the shop when he stops to look me over.

"Aren't you on break?"

"Overtime!"

I wave at him as I rush on, turning around to see him brace himself after carrying the load off the truck. After all, he is in his fifties.

"I'll do it!"

I run back to carry the remaining two boxes into the restaurant as fast as I can.

"What drugs did you take to turn you into the Hulk?" The owner smirks. "But if he's asking you to rush over at such a late hour, your boss is not treating you well."

"Must be an emergency. He wouldn't have pushed me if I really didn't want to go." I put the crate down. "Done!"

"Sure, he didn't have the heart to force you. You're going out of your own free will. After such a long break, you must be missing your boss. It's not uncommon to see young people complaining about their bosses or cursing them, but you, you're

beaming every time you see your boss. I'd understand if your boss was a gorgeous woman..."

I don't have time for chitchat. "You're getting better at Chinese!"

As I am leaving, I hear him say behind me, "Lost sheep…"

I bet he doesn't even know what that means.

The entrance is dark when I make it to Salinger's house; not even the living room light is on. I kick off my shoes and fumble around for the light switch when the living room light comes on. Salinger comes out of the workshop wearing a black long-sleeve T-shirt and khaki slacks.

As I change my shoes, I glance up. "Lin Sai-*ge*, what's so urgent?"

Salinger holds a pile of sheet music in his hand as he walks over to the piano to put it down. "We ran into some copyright issues with a cover on the new album. It's temporarily called off from being used. Stone wants me to write a new one as soon as possible."

I freeze. "Now?"

Salinger sits down before the piano, hands on his lap. He nods, looking at me. "Yup."

How can you just say "yup" when it is so urgent?

"What do you need me to do?" I ask.

Salinger lifts the fallboard. "It's actually finished. I'm just not sure." He lays the score out on the piano and passes me one of the copies. "Sing it to me and give me a little feedback."

I hurry forward and take the sheets. On the sheets are the score and the lyrics written in a messy scrawl. Luckily, I've gotten comfortable with the way he writes his music as if he is sleepwalking.

"Anything you can't read? I was a bit casual with the way I wrote it." Salinger looks at me.

"Casual" is a massive understatement. It is capricious. Amused, I skim over the score.

"It's a slow song?" Quite a surprise.

"Well, the original cover song is a slow tune. Stone wanted the same theme and tone, but I keep feeling like something is missing." Salinger says, "I'll play it first while you get comfortable with it."

I thought he would sing it for me, but again, that is asking for too much. He only plays the melody on the piano. I am slightly disappointed. But as the song goes on, my disappointment with the lack of vocals is replaced by another surprise.

The melody is as good as ever, but this is not Salinger's usual slow rock style. Though his old slow songs have their share of tenderness, they always have a chilling edge. Whereas this one, despite its somewhat sad melody, manages to give you heartfelt warmth during the chorus, which is a refreshing surprise.

When he finishes, he puts his hands back on his lap. "What do you think?"

"It's...very unusual." I am out of words. "It feels very special amongst all your other songs."

"Yeah? I kinda feel the same."

Salinger hunches down, staring at the scores on his piano.

“Stone is probably writing a song at the same time. We agreed to use the song that gets the most votes. The one we were originally gonna use is a cover of a melodic British slow rock song about first-time lovers experiencing the longing of being in a long-distance relationship. That’s always Stone’s specialty, but this time I don’t want to lose.”

“Why?” I ask, before I realize it is not appropriate. It is not a question I should be asking, nor is it a question that has anything to do with music anyway. I just can’t help but be curious the moment he says it.

Salinger ponders this for a rare moment before saying, “I just don’t want to lose. But I can’t remember what it was like to be separated from my first love. I guess it felt kind of sweet, but also heartbreaking, right? Have I conveyed that?”

“Absolutely!” That is what I heard, sweet and heartbreaking.

“You can put the backpack down now, then.” Salinger chuckles.

I suddenly become aware of the backpack I have been carrying since I walked in, so I pull it off. That is when I hear Salinger mumble, “When I was writing this song, I was actually thinking of—”

I turn around, but he cuts himself off. He shakes his head, lips pursed. He looks down at the score.

“Something is still missing.”

The whole space falls silent as he becomes lost in thought. The piano and his reflection are framed by the huge French windows, beyond which is the deep night sky. The same depth is in his eyes as he gazes at the score, bottomless and boundless… So much so that this beautiful view of the man seems incredibly far away.

Separated from each other, missing each other but unable to touch, knowing that the longing will come to nothing but still unable to stop yourself from drowning in the feelings. Bittersweet. This is his song. It perfectly expresses that feeling, so if there is anything that isn’t satisfactory…

I read the lyrics again. Salinger said it’s about lovers being separated from their first love while missing each other, but I read it more like the singer missing someone for the first time and starting to wonder if it’s love. It is an experience so amazing that you start asking yourself, asking the stars outside the window, asking the gods in heaven... It seems he is willing to keep asking forever. The answer is never truly demanded, but there should be one. If it was Stone, he would have been straightforward. He would have known what moves fans the most.

“How about a bridge?” I speak up, inspired by the one he added to my song earlier.

Salinger gets up from the piano seat. “Come play the bridge you want to add.”

I sit in front of the piano before it dawns on me—this is a Steinway. I have never played such an expensive piano before, so I can’t help but take a deep breath and stare at the black and white keys.

I burn my boat. “It might not fit. Anyway…Lin Sai-*ge*, you don’t have to take it seriously.”

“Sure, I won’t take it seriously.”

I'd murmured that to myself in front of the piano, not expecting a reply, but Salinger's voice comes from just above me. The lid isn't propped up, but it still reflects Salinger's silhouette like a reflection in the water waiting silently on the shore behind me. I know he is saying this to make me less nervous, but it only has the opposite effect. When a man says "I won't take it seriously" in a serious tone, does he mean he won't take it seriously, or does he mean he will?

I begin with the second chorus. The Steinway has the heaviest keys among all the pianos I have ever played. The thick and gorgeous sound is truly extraordinary. Accompanied by the sound, everything looks like a painting—the clear reflections on the body of the piano, and the flowing starry sky outside the French windows. Everything inspires me. I suppose when someone is missing another person to the extreme, the world he sees must be different. The window is no longer a window, the piano is no longer a piano; the bright glass, the smooth body of the piano, everything must be a reflection of that person. The stars or the sky, he has to witness everything with that other person, which will make him sure that it is love, and will make his love more certain.

Yes, so certain that when the fingers touch the keys, they produce the heaviest and brightest notes. So certain that, when hammers lift, they strike right at the heart of the strings with precision. So certain that you can say with certainty at the end of the song—

Wish it is love.

Wish it is love.

…

I finish playing. Apart from the bridge, I also added a couple of repetitions at the end, using the prelude written by Salinger. It isn't polished. It would be nice to fine tune a few bits... I am so lost in thought that only after ten seconds or so do I realize I am still occupying the seat. When I try to get up, Salinger presses his hand on my shoulder.

"Play it for me again."

I play it again from the top. As I go into the bridge, more arrangements come to mind now that I've become more familiar with the song. But I can't play the entire accompaniment I'm imagining with only one piano. In fact, it would have been perfect to have a low bass line here...

Salinger's right hand is suddenly there in that exact spot. It is not an illusion. It is where the bassline is, where the bass is, where he is. The bassline I wanted to magically appear at that very moment.

His silhouette is still reflected on the piano, standing to my left, his head bowed in concentration. His expression doesn't shift even though he suddenly joins in playing, as if he is just passing by a window display and stopping to rearrange it and make it look better.

Unaware of the shock I am experiencing, he keeps reinforcing it. He appears when I think there should be a guitar here, and again appears when I think there should be a bass there. When I think it would be nice to have some ornamental sounds, the ornamental sounds appear... He appears everywhere I've dreamt, in every way I've fantasized.

I can't contain my thrill when I finish playing, but Salinger doesn't meet my eyes. He just grabs the sheets and quickly adds the bridge section with his pen,

stopping suddenly as he writes and frowning to himself.

"But you wrote this..."

He stares down at me like he's run into a calculus problem. I stand up as I excitedly say, "It's just a bridge. It's totally fine!"

Please do take it. It'd a great honor for any fan!

Salinger presses one hand on the lid, looking down at the written bridge. "I can rewrite the bridge..."

Why is he not listening to what I am saying? I can't even describe how disappointed I am...

"But I don't really want to," he mutters. Just as my heart is about to jump out of my chest with stress, he decides, "That's it. I'll name both of us as the composers of this song."

I am exhilarated, but I know LOTUS has never done this.

"LOTUS never writes anyone else's name," I say. "Lin Sai-*ge*, consider it a swap. A fair exchange of this bridge for the bridge you wrote for me!"

Salinger looks at me. "But it's not really fair."

Without saying anything else, he walks over to get the wooden bass on the couch, the look on his face stopping me from saying another word. He hands me the bass.

"Sing it again?"

"Yeah!"

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

He brings another acoustic guitar from the studio. He sits on the two steps of stairs that lead to the piano on the raised platform, leaning his back against the piano, looking up at me. His eyes speak. I don't even have to ask him what he means. I just sit next to him.

Before we begin, Salinger takes a pen and corrects something on the sheets again, then passes them to me. "Sing it this way."

I skim it to find all the challenging high notes removed. "It's okay, Lin Sai-*ge*. It's okay for me to sing the high notes once in a while. It won't sound good if you change it."

Salinger is tuning his guitar with his head bowed. "Just sing it."

The guitar is the only instrument in the intro. I sing the first line, backed by Salinger's guitar. It is just so good. Every line of the lyrics feels so comfortable to sing. It is like everything from your throat to your chest starts opening up. Being Salinger's lead vocal must be addictive; no wonder Ji Shi is so engaged and excited about their live shows.

After two short interludes, it comes to the revised chorus. I am still a little frustrated by the lack of high notes, yet when I start singing the first line of the chorus, the high notes don't disappear—Salinger is singing in harmony.

It happens so suddenly; I almost skipped a line in the song. I look at him incredulously. He keeps his head down, still looking at the sheets, not at me. I can't see his face at all, probably because he is sitting at an angle that hides his face. All I can see is his breath causing his throat to vibrate as he chants.

His voice isn't smooth, but the high-pitched intervals are still handled expertly. I can tell by the slight trembling in the line of his neck that it is perfectly resonating in his chest. No matter how unsuitable his voice is for singing these days, just the thought of Salinger singing the vocal harmony for me automatically sets my ears to euphoria mode.

When we finish, Salinger tilts his head to look at me, guitar in his arms. "That is beautiful."

"The official version won't have any vocal harmony, will it?" I ask.

"No." He shakes his head.

"It's a shame. The chords are great," I muster enough courage to manage.

Not saying a word, he stands up and looks out the window. "I'll be up all night arranging the song. It's late. Don't go back today. There's a guest room on the second floor. Go get some sleep."

It is past three in the morning. I am not usually that sleepy at this hour, but today I've probably burnt out from all the adrenaline coursing through me.

"No need for the guest room. I won't be able to sleep for long. Let me just crash on the couch."

"Why sleep on the couch when there's a bed?" Salinger says. "I haven't used the guest room before, but the couch I've sat or slept on, or placed the guitar on every once in a while. Your choice."

With that, he puts the guitar on the couch.

Drops the sheet music on it, too.

The guest room is cleaned regularly by Ms. Zhang, but it still feels cold and cheerless. I can't sleep at all, even though I feel sleepy, so after a lot of tossing and turning, I get up.

The door to the workshop downstairs is closed. The soundproofing is too good, or maybe my hearing is too impaired; I can't hear anything inside. I figure I'd better head home, but I don't want to disturb him now. Remembering that there is a notepad on the fridge, I think to just write him a note instead.

I head for the kitchen when the workshop door opens and Salinger sees me. "What's wrong? Are you thirsty?"

"Lin Sai-*ge*, perhaps I..."

Halfway through, I see the open workshop behind him, its bright light coming through. Suddenly I feel a longing I can't hold back.

"Perhaps what?" Salinger asks.

He stands before the backlit door. His stance, his eyes, his tone, all spelling utter calmness, but to my eyes it is as seductive as a collapsing gravitational field.

I can't resist saying, "If it doesn't bother you, would it be possible for me to watch you arrange the song?"

Salinger stands before the door as if thinking about the idea for a moment. "I'm not really used to people watching me work, but if you can promise to be like a ghost, like the time you followed me in Tokyo..."

"I promise not to make a sound!"

Salinger gives me the once-over, then nods. I follow him into the workshop as I wished. He suddenly stops at the door and turns back to me.

"Do I really sound serious when I joke?"

I look at him, puzzled.

"Never mind. Make yourself comfortable." He scratches his head and sits at his desk.

There is no place to sit in the workshop other than that set of equipment and his own chair, but I am quite comfortable sitting on the floor. Rather than watching Salinger arrange, it is more like listening to him arrange. I don't want to sit next to him or stand behind him and bother him. I sometimes talk to myself when I am arranging, muttering "what the hell" or "crap" when I'm not satisfied, or genuinely complimenting myself with "that's fantastic" or "I am a genius" when I am doing well. No one can hear me anyway.

I don't know if it is because I am there, or if he's always been like this, but Salinger doesn't say anything when he arranges. There is only music in the workshop, plunging, bursting, stuff he cuts out and leaves uncut, reflecting his emotions.

Although he doesn't talk, he smokes. Occasionally, he holds a cigarette in his hand for a long time without taking a drag. Sometimes I become dazed and, seeing him with his head tilted, I think he looks rather boyish. But then I notice there is a cigarette in the hand holding his head, breaking the illusion. Sometimes he runs a hand through his hair or moves his fingers and the cigarette butt gets so close to his hair; sometimes I want to shout a warning but can't. I have to pray in fear that he moves the cigarette away, or I might have to shout. Thankfully, he finally removes it, but it is a bit late. The ash falls and is about to land on a piece of sheet music, which I quickly swoop in and lift out of the way.

Salinger leans back in his chair. It is a hard slump. He is apparently oblivious to what is happening behind him. Fear lingering, I think to myself that he might burn his workshop down without even knowing it. But then I have the mental image of him pouring his heart into his work in the middle of a fire. It is cool and suits him.

Arranging music is a tedious process, trying out different instrumentations and sound combinations over and over again. Whether it can be done in one go or not depends on the state of play. Sometimes the tracks just click, or maybe everything gets thrown away after a whole night of work. After a while I start to get drowsy, drifting off to sleep to the smell of Davidoff's smoke.

The scene of the airport fan pick-up appears in my dream, with *xuejie* standing next to me. Standing at the back of the crowd, we see the young LOTUS coming out of the passageway. After seeing Stone, Ji Shi, Alan, and Li Xiang walk by, finally we see the person we've been waiting for—the then-twenty-two-year-old Salinger walking out wearing that blue and white long-sleeved baseball tee and a white baseball cap, a bass bag over both shoulders.

Xuejie grabs my arm with both hands. "He's coming through. He's almost through. Call for him!"

I suddenly feel that same urgency and discontent. I let out a powerful shout as if I am singing a hard rock song. "Salinger, I love you—"

Suddenly, everything at the airport freezes. All the bouncing images and sounds feel as though they have been put on pause. I see the bass bag on the back of

Salinger from five years ago, who stops and turns to look at me. Even in the stillness of my dream, his voice echoes with charm as he asks, “What did you say?”

My heart races. Being watched by my idol and being asked to say that again brings me more excitement than embarrassment, such a feeling is…

The twenty-two-year-old Salinger presses his white baseball cap and walks toward me. “Didn’t we agree on not bothering me?”

Then I recall—I did promise him something, it seems. He walks through the crowd toward me, like he has calmly traversed a sea of people on Tokyo streets, removing his bass bag as he walks. I crowd gracefully parts by his shoulders.

“I’ll have to wake you, then.”

...

I hear the bright, splendid sound of electric guitars, accompanied by bass and drums, as brilliant as the sunlight breaking through the clouds. Although I don’t want to let go of my dream, the music is so heart-warming, it can compete.

I open my eyes to a blurred figure standing with his back to the desk. He has the same tall stature as the twenty-two-year-old bassist in my dream. There is no sunlight in the room, yet the sound of the electric piano hits my eyelids like spots of light. I can see Salinger looking at me with his arms folded. The demo he has finished making is playing from behind him in the workshop, astonishingly polished and astonishingly beautiful, more so than my beautiful dream.

“It’s done.” Looking down at me, he asks, “How is it?”

I hear the bridge I wrote. He gave it the richest drum line in the whole song. Salinger even arranged a few different tracks on different pitches for the electric guitar the way you would with strings, producing a colorful sound. As the chorus turns, the whispering bass acts as a signal to ignite all the instruments. The band, immersed in the music, makes the song explode into beauty like fireworks.

It is great. I am still inhaling his second-hand Davidoff smoke, but I feel refreshed as if I am on pure oxygen. I straighten my back.

“You’ll definitely win!”

Salinger grins, then turns back to his desk. “I’ll edit it a bit more. You go back to sleep.”

I don’t go back to sleep. I check the time; it is almost nine o’clock. I quietly push open the door and head downstairs to get breakfast from the Hong Kong-style diner. When I come back, I don’t see Salinger in the workshop. A memory stick is left on the desk. The synthesizer and computer are still on. I step out, confused, before I see Salinger coming down the stairs. He stops on the stairs the moment he sees me.

“When did you go out?”

“I saw you’re already doing post-production, so I went out to get breakfast.”

Salinger looks at me and sighs. “I thought you’d really turned into a ghost.”

TRACK 13

IT is decided that his song will be featured in the new album. Stone actually wrote a very good song in his usual lyrical slow rock style, but when the vote was made, Ji Shi voted for Salinger, who eventually won by two votes against one.

When that happened, even Ji Shi was surprised. “Did you really write this one? Handsome Sai, I’m surprised. It’s practically tailored for me!”

Salinger looked down to take off his bass. “Well, happy romancing.”

Stone took a drag on his cigarette next to them. “Those who don’t know any better may think you two are hooking up.”

The band goes into the studio a few days later to record. Because the arrangements are a bit complicated, they don’t record at the same time. Naturally, the polyphonic electric guitars are performed by Stone and Salinger themselves. As soon as these two enter the studio, Xiaoxiao, Lisa and Hai, who have been gabbing away outside the studio earlier, rush in as well. Stone waves impatiently from this side of the glass.

“Don’t be such fangirls. You’re making me cringe. You guys get out, get out!”

The three stand by the door giggling and shaking their heads. Stone can’t do anything. It’s not like he can take off his guitar and come kick them out, so he turns to Salinger.

“Don’t you even mind?”

Salinger puts on his guitar and looks up at the three people outside. I’m afraid he’ll ask Xiaoxiao and the others to leave, which will mean I have to follow them.

He just says three words, not into the microphone, so I don’t hear the sound, but what I make out is “used to it.” Stone makes a face toward the sky as if he can’t stand it—then, as if remembering something, he comes closer to the microphone and asks me, “Chi Nan, will your ears be okay with this?”

I tell him it’s fine; I’ll just listen to it for a moment. Salinger is going to play electric guitar. It will be a loss for me not to listen!

Stone looks over at Salinger, who doesn’t say anything else. He flips to the right page on the music sheet as he says, “We’ll do it in one take.”

Stone shrugs. “That’s up to you anyway.”

Two of the best guitarists in the industry are playing against each other. When the electric guitars come out, it makes you want to scream. As always, they work perfectly together. They finished it in just one take, which I think they totally nailed it. As expected, the recording crew also raise their hands in applause.

“Yeah, we can use this one! It’s explosive!”

When they were recording a song in Japan, there was a song called “*Revolution”* which had several instrumental bars where the guitar and bass were almost identical. That was the only time I’d ever seen these two play together and not get it right. It was only a little bit off, but Stone is a perfectionist, so he shook his head and said to Salinger, “Let’s work out a way of playing it and both stick to that.”

Salinger replied, “No, you play it once for me first. I’ll do what you do.”

Salinger peered at his hand as Stone played the whole song from beginning to end, even getting a note wrong in the middle. Salinger looked at him in confusion.

Stone said, embarrassed, “Do you have to stare at my hand like that?”

“What am I doing wrong?”

Stone finally lost his cool. “It is too fucking intense!”

Salinger shrugged. “That’s because your fingerpicking is quite sexy.”

Stone was so mad that he rolled up his sheet music from the stand and smacked Salinger on the head with it. “Salinger, will you stop and be serious for one second?”

Alan and Ji Shi shouted from outside the studio, “Punch him! Jump up and punch him!”

Salinger said, “Enough.” Lifting his hand, he snatched up the score Stone used to whack him with and put it back. He looked up at the recording crew and said, “Let’s start.”

Then he played in exactly the same way as Stone, addressing all the segments with the same intervals, especially a certain bar in the chorus. The bar had fast marching sixteenth notes, but even down to the smallest details—including the speed and rhythm, hitting hooks and slides—he played it exactly the same, almost as if they were twins, except that one was a guitar in the upper register and one was a bass in the lower register.

Although I knew he’s a genius, Salinger’s genius is always refreshing my perception of my idol. I wonder if he knew that the way he fingerpicked that day was sexy, too.

The recording for the new song is done in the morning. Stone straps his guitar across his back and leaves with Ji Shi, and the two of them walk away chatting and laughing.

Alan shouts from the studio, “Hey, someone help me carry the drums!”

Hai is the only one helping, shoving cymbals of all sizes into the case without taking them apart at all. Shocked by his carelessness, Alan has to take them all out again.

Seeing all this, I say to Salinger, “Lin Sai-*ge*, I’ll go give them a hand.”

Salinger looks back at Hai, who is not helping at all, and nods.

The drum sets are packed into two huge cases. I carry one out first. Stone and the others are already waiting in a nanny car ahead of us. Salinger is smoking alone outside the car. His sunglasses catch the sunlight and glare. I look around instinctively. Watching out for the paparazzi has become a knee-jerk reflex for me now.

Salinger helps me open the trunk. I say thank you and settle the case inside. The drums are worth hundreds of thousands; I can’t afford to be sloppy, but as soon as I put the case in, I feel something underneath bump against it.

Salinger holds the trunk lid open with his right hand as he looks down. “What’s wrong?”

I move the case out of the way, and there is...a pair of drumsticks pressing underneath?

Salinger tugs his sunglasses down to take a look, then shouts, “Alan!”

Alan walks out with his case in his arms. “What’s the matter now?” Walking over and seeing the pair of drumsticks that thrown in the trunk, already dirty, he glances up at Salinger with a bit of embarrassment. “Oops, I was looking for them earlier. How did they get here?”

Salinger tells him to take them out, and Alan dutifully takes out his drumsticks before the trunk slams shut with a bang.

Alan rubs the back of his neck, his heart pounding. “Careful! Are you pulling down the guillotine?”

Salinger stares at him through his sunglasses, cigarette between his lips. “Guillo-what?”

“Guillo...” Alan mumbles, tapping the pair of drumsticks between his hands, looking bummed. “Great timing. I’d just bought new ones. Now this set nearly got broken.”

Salinger takes the drumsticks from him and looks down at them. Alan shrugs, saying silently, *look, they’re broken.*

Stone peeks out of the front door of the nanny van. “Can you stop throwing your drumsticks in the trunk from now on? You’ve gotten enough pairs replaced!”

Salinger holds the drumsticks in his hand, rubbing over the scar with his fingertips, then tosses it back to Alan. “Be a little nicer toward your instruments.”

He gives no further comment on what Alan should do with his drumsticks.

After this, it’s just shooting the music video and the cover. The release of the new album is coming up and everyone is excited, none more so than Stone. Back at the office that day, as they walked through the long corridor, Stone turned back to Salinger, who was walking last, and said, “Wonderful! This time we’re finally not bundling our new album release with one of your scandals!”

Alan interjected, “It means that you can release the magic seal now, Handsome Sai!”

Stone immediately slapped him on the head. “This kind of demon king has to stay sealed!”

Salinger ignored them.

Ji Shi stepped forward and put his arm around Stone’s shoulders. “Hey, I heard that there’s a psychic master in Japan who can make people change their personalities. He can turn straight people gay, and vice versa. Even playboys can become frigid. Why don’t we go there next time and bring Salinger to try—ouch!” He covered his hips as he turned around. “Salinger, you can reason with people when you’re angry. Don’t just kick them in the ass! What a gangster!”

The walkway leading to the rehearsal hall is bright and spacious. We are walking behind them, carrying all the luggage when Xiaoxiao suddenly raises her hand to stop us and takes a picture of the backs of the five people in front of us with her phone.

“Wow! I’ve always wanted to take a back shot of all five of them lined up. A shot like this that shows their strong return is simply awesome as hell!”

It is a beautiful shot of five guys walking down a straight passage with their instrument bags on their backs. The passage is bright, the figures are clear. Whether you say they are handsome or dashing, the kind of vibe that belongs to a rock band is beyond words.

Many years ago, they must have walked side by side like this, but in obscure underground tunnels or abandoned underground garages. Only a band that has overcome a difficult past can walk this white passage with ease.

The new album launch press release is packed as usual. A 45-second promo clip is aired. This time, the director has a unique twist with the music video for the lead song, which features shots of the band members playing other members of the team. When the scene of Ji Shi playing the electric guitar comes out, the media are all scrambling to get a shot.

The MV was filmed by the sea using an upgraded camera, so that the final video has a slow-motion effect when you play it back normally despite the frame rate being normal. Against the backdrop of a boundless sea, Stone plays an antique piano on the beach. Li Xiang stands barefoot on the beach playing the bass while Alan becomes the front vocal—of course the vocal is still Ji Shi’s. The effect is innovative and fantastic. After 45 seconds, the promo ends with Salinger playing the drums. The upscaling gives the tremors of the drums a beautiful delayed effect; plus, it’s Salinger who plays the drums. A single look at the upgraded shot and you’ll instantly be hooked. The atmosphere at the launch party immediately heats up.

It isn’t just Xiaoxiao; even Lisa can’t hold her comments. “Salinger is so hot playing the drums!”

“No kidding,” says Hai. “It’s Salinger who taught Alan how to play the drums.”

Julie shrugs. “When Alan worshipped Salinger, he used to chase after him, flattering him and calling him the King of Rhythm. Those days are long gone.”

“Really? Salinger doesn’t feel aggrieved?” Xiaoxiao chuckles. “And does he think, ‘You called me the King of Rhythm when you worshipped me, but the King of Filth now that you don’t like me anymore!”

I’ve always been curious as to where Salinger got his King of Filth nickname from. Although he did have a lot of rumored romances, how could someone tell he had a filthy mind? Hai just says it is a long story.

Before he can finish his sentence, a loud *bam!* comes from the stage. Li Xiang leads the way smashing the block of ice with the words “one million” frozen inside, followed by Alan banging his hammer. *Thud, thud, thud, thud.* He hits it harder than his own drums. Ji Shi picks up a small hammer and throws it upwards with flair, but he overdoes it and it is thrown over his head. When he realizes he can’t catch it, he reflexively crouches with his head in his hands and the people next to him all rush to dodge it. The small hammer goes over Ji Shi’s head and misses him. It is caught by Salinger, who is standing next to him and puts it back. Stone glares at Ji Shi from the ground.

At last, Ji Shi knocks on the half-broken ice.

The host comes to check and say that only “one” and “mil-” have been exposed, and that the most crucial second half of the word “million” has not yet shown up. He asks Stone and Salinger to smash the word “million” out together.

Stone has never been a fan of game sessions, so he says, “It’s impossible to crack the million out. Let’s just leave it.”

The audience boos instantly.

The host says, “How about this—you two smash together, just a little smash. If you crack it, the new album sales can pass the one million mark. If not, it won’t pass. Want to bet?”

Stone immediately picks up the hammer and gives the other to Salinger, saying, “In case you’re distracted, let me remind you to smash it. We both smash together. Make it resonate. It’ll crack!”

Salinger has a “didn’t you say you don’t believe this crap?” look on his face, but Stone impatiently shoves the hammer into his hand.

“Take it. You can do it!”

Two little hammers on the ice. Stone says, “On my count of three, two, one. Hit with me!”

“Three, two, one!”

The two hammers slam down together. The ice breaks, but not all of it. A large piece breaks with a clatter, followed by another piece, but only half of the second half of the word “million” is exposed.

The host says, “Not bad, not bad, you’ve basically revealed it!”

Stone is confused when he comes down. “How come you can work with me perfectly on a bass, but not on something this simple?”

Salinger twirls the little hammer in his hand. “It’s a hammer, not a bass.”

Frustrated, Stone crosses his arms. “Salinger, talking to you is exhausting...”

Up to this point, the atmosphere is still pleasant. Next up is the press session, where Stone is answering all the questions about the new album, talking about the concepts. When asked non-music-related questions, he just ignores them, so leader Li Xiang has to come out and say something for the occasion.

A female reporter gets up and congratulates the band on their release of the new album, before saying she has two questions. First, she asks about any anecdotes from the shooting for the music video, which is not the kind of answer Li Xiang is good at crafting. He first looks at Stone, who doesn’t care for such questions, then he looks at Alan, who takes the microphone and rattles on—something about the music video being shot on the beach. Stone is super afraid of crabs, so Ji Shi went around flipping crabs to scare him, and the whole beach echoed with his spooky laughter.

Stone argues, “It’s not that I’m afraid of crabs. I just don’t like things with lots of legs!”

The host asks, “What about shrimp? Do you never eat them?”

“Of course not! They look super creepy!”

On stage, they are chatting about funny stories from the music video shoot. Most of the journalists below are also enjoying the conversation, but the reporter who asked the question looks like she doesn’t really care. Towards the end of the conversation, her eyes are subtly directed at Salinger, who is standing at the far side trying his best to hide his presence.

I suddenly have a bad feeling.

“Second question.” The reporter’s gaze is definitely directed at Salinger. “Some paparazzi caught pictures of Salinger and Ren Meilun together. Do you have anything to say about that, Salinger?”

The confrontation comes unexpectedly, and the crowd explodes. Stone looks at Salinger in disbelief. The microphone is still with Li Xiang and Stone, both of whom are probably still in shock, so neither of them hand it over to Salinger to answer. The host has to go around to Salinger and carefully hold up the microphone for him. Salinger doesn’t look at the host who approaches him; his eyes are fixed on the reporter asking the questions from offstage.

He says coldly, “We’re just friends.”

The reporter pushes, “Are you really just friends?”

“Believe what you will.”

The host’s microphone is still poking in front of him when Salinger grabs the host’s hand and pushes it away directly. This time the host seems to sense his rejection, so he doesn’t pass the mic up again.

“But you were seen driving away from the townhouse Ren Meilun lives in early in the morning, and dropping her off all the way at the TV station. Is that what you do for friends, too?” The female reporter raises her voice.

I guess the look on my face at the moment must have been no less shocked than Stone’s, because it hadn’t occurred to me at all that he has been staying at Ren Meilun’s house for any length of time. When, exactly, I did not know, but I wasn’t exactly following him twenty-four hours a day. Salinger is a man who values his privacy, and has ways of keeping himself out of anyone’s reach if he doesn’t want to be disturbed.

The whole room is in an uproar. Stone already appears upset, and Li Xiang looks embarrassed. Xiaoxiao hurriedly scrolls on her phone. Sure enough, she finds a photo that has already been revealed by a celebrity gossip account that was posted this morning, exactly on the day of the new album launch—as if arranged.

I skim the photo. The car in it isn’t the white Maserati Levante that Salinger usually drives, but a black Cadillac SUV I’ve never seen before. In it, he is wearing a navy-blue pullover sweater and is watching as Ren Meilun gets out of his car. It must have been right at the end of May or beginning of June; a long time ago now. He didn’t break his promise to Stone, but the gossip magazines *had* to wait until the last minute to come out and break the story.

Salinger stares at the female reporter, not saying anything; the host doesn’t dare to pass the microphone up again. Li Xiang-*ge* has to come out to smooth things over.

“Today is the launch of LOTUS’s new album. I hope you guys won’t ask questions not related to music.”

“Ah, sorry.” The female reporter acts like she is apologetic. “I thought this was helping the album get more publicity.”

Everyone is laughing offstage. Even Ji Shi can’t bear it any longer; he’s about to take the microphone when Stone, who can’t stand it anymore, picks it up and loudly clears his throat.

“Hey, auntie. You’re a reporter for the *Hurricane Music* website, right? Your website has existed since when I was in high school. Back then, I remember it was all about introducing and discussing music, but I haven’t been there in the last couple of years—because one look at the disgusting breaking news and gimmicks on the front page of the website would make me throw up my meal from the night before. I don’t mind you focusing on artists’ private lives, but in that case, could you please change the name of your website to *Hurricane Gossip*? That way, we won’t have to invite you next time, and we’ll all be happy. What do you say?”

The retort is so powerful that the reporter’s face is turning green. Alan claps twice next to him.

Stone looks at all the reporters offstage. “We have a few trouble-makers in the band—some with little brain, some who think they’re Romeos. But are they talentless? Do any of you have no flaws at all? Yeah, I know what you’re trying to say. *But that’s what fans and viewers want to see...*Come on, aren’t you the ones pushing this trend? Fans and followers are young, and they only see this nonsense all day long, so they think that’s all there is to see. If you allow them to read the good stuff and guide them toward the music itself, they’ll find that the world of music is a million times better than the wretched world of showbiz! With all due respect, showbiz is a mess now thanks to you, but at least we—”

He gestures to himself and his bandmates next to him.

“—We’re still making music. What about you guys? Is your ultimate goal in life just nasty stuff like this? Can’t you see anything worthwhile and beautiful anymore?”

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

The launch comes to an end on an extremely unpleasant note, but Stone is five yards tall in my eyes today. I don’t know what *Hurricane Music* will write, but Salinger’s troubles aren’t over yet. As soon as the launch is over, Stone rushes up and grabs Salinger by his collar.

“Will you stop fucking up and causing trouble?!”

Salinger says sorry.

“If you want romance, settle down and take it seriously—but do you really want that? Other people don’t know you well, but I do. You don’t want to settle down at all. You can’t be tied down by love, so what are you doing messing around with these girls? Have you ever been in a relationship for more than six months? For those who know, you’re just efficient in love. For those who don’t, they think you

have a messy private life. No wonder the paparazzi are stalking you all day long!"

Ji Shi comes over and tries to pull Stone away. "Come on, we're all teammates. Don't make it ugly. It's not like he wants this, either."

"He doesn't want it? Can't he control his own fucking dick? And you—smashing ice and throwing hammers, you think you're Thor? Can you stop pulling these stupid tricks from now on?"

In the end, it turns into another bickering session between Ji Shi and Stone. Li Xiang takes the chance to wink at Salinger. Covering him along with Alan, they let him out of the room. I grab his jacket and follow him out. If Stone were to ask me about it now, it would be like adding gasoline to fire. Just as I close the door, I hear Stone shout irritably from inside.

"Where's Salinger? Has he bailed already? What did he promise me? Doesn't he owe me an explanation? Lin Sai, you asshole!"

Salinger hasn't gone far, really. He is standing before the elevator entrance, waiting for it, and when Stone shouts "asshole" he turns around and heads for the stairwell. The door to the stairwell slams hard behind him, swinging back and forth for quite a while. I hesitantly walk over and see him leaning against the railing, swiping on his phone with his head down before tucking it into his pocket and checking them, only to realize he doesn't have his cigarettes or lighter with him. I enter, passing him his cigarettes and lighter from his jacket.

"Lin Sai-*ge*, I'll go back first. I'll call you when it's time to leave."

"Back where? So you can get yelled at for me?" Salinger says, "No need, just stay here."

The stairwell is small. Somehow, I feel uncomfortable standing anywhere with Salinger right next to me, especially after what had happened.

Salinger is still looking down at his phone, swiping with his fingers. the expression on his face is unreadable, but his eyes freeze for a few seconds every once in a while—I know he's seeing something nasty, though he scrolls past it quickly.

I am standing by the door so I can keep an eye on that side of the room when I suddenly hear Salinger ask, "Are you disappointed in me?"

I turn back to see him staring at me. Perhaps I am just unused to it. I won't say I am disappointed. I knew he's deep in gossip, but it'll take a little time to get used to it when one of his rumored romances just drops out of nowhere.

"I'm your assistant. I don't pay attention to that stuff."

"Thought you'd say you're my fan."

"Fans care even less about it," I say. "It's your talent that fans care about."

"You're the only one like that out of all my fans, you know?" Salinger says. "And am I talented enough to be exempt from punishment, no matter how much of a scumbag I've become?"

"Lin Sai-*ge*, you're not a scumbag at all. You're wonderful," I say.

No one will use the word "scumbag" on you, unless there is no one else in the world.

“What makes you say that?” Salinger looks at me. “How well do you know me?”

*I may not know you well enough in private. You’re good at keeping people at a distance, but you can’t keep that distance in music. It’s the one field where you have to be fully committed and unreserved. Whether it’s “*Rooftop,” *the song written about school violence, “*Giant Wave,” *the song written for people in distress, or “*1729,” *a tribute to tormented geniuses, you have no idea how many people have been affected and changed by you in a very positive way. What I know best about you is that your talent is directly proportional to your tenderness.*

“The kind of person who can write those songs,” I say, “is a good person.”

I don’t need to know anything else.

Salinger leans back on the railing, sighing and gazing at me with a complex look I don’t understand. “How is your fanboy filter so thick...?”

It isn’t a fan filter. You’re the one who underestimates yourself, Salinger.

“You actually texted me that morning. Remember how I replied to you?” Salinger suddenly says.

It’s been so long, I really don’t remember. “Maybe you are...at the racetrack?”

“Take your phone out and check. May 27th.”

I pull out my phone and scroll to the record for that day.

--Lin Sai-ge, are you outside?

--Hmm.

--At the racetrack.

--Okay, I’ve got food in the freezer. The dry cleaning is on the couch. Be careful on the racetrack.

--Okay.

I finish reading it and look up at him. He looks at me as well.

“If I was at the racetrack, there’s no way I could have gotten back to you that quickly. You don’t have any doubts at all? You trust me *that* much?”

To be honest, I was a little uncomfortable then. It’s all in the past, and now I have to face it again—the circumstances in which he lied. I can’t help but think about where he was and what he was doing when he replied to my texts. I don’t care, but now I can’t not care anymore.

“Let me teach you,” Salinger says. “Next time I say I’m going to the racetrack, you check if the Ducati is still parked; if I say I’m at the gym, you can call my fitness instructor. Just say there’s an emergency. You’ll know immediately if I’m really working out.”

I can’t tell if he is serious.

“Chi Nan, as an assistant and an artist, we’re not in the same league. I sometimes wonder if I ought to teach you the tricks for dealing with me.”

“Lin Sai-*ge*, I don’t work for Xu Zhang-*ge*, nor do I work for the company.”

Why would I want to deal with my boss and my idol like that? Aren't you and I on the same side?

"I know who you work for better than anyone." Salinger says, "But you shouldn't trust me that much." He comes over and takes my phone, looking down at it. "You even told me to be careful racing when I lied. And all I said was 'Okay.' Stone is right. I *am* an asshole…"

It sounds like he is saying it to me, but also to himself.

TRACK 14

ONCE the scandal is out, even the drumming performance in the MV seems unable to recover Salinger's reputation. To my surprise, Xu Zhang does not ask to speak to me. Once I went downstairs to get takeout and bumped into him; he just nodded at me and walked away, at which point I couldn't help but call out to him myself.

"Xu Zhang-*ge*!"

He might as well scold me; for once, I really wanted him to do so. How on earth can I be a good assistant? I am lost.

Xu Zhang turned toward the sound and nodded, as if he understood it all before I could say anything. "I know it you're innocent this time. It's because you're inexperienced that you're always getting fooled by him. Be smarter next time!"

Speechless, I watched him leave in a hurry. The gossip Salinger left behind has probably kept him pretty busy these days.

"Xu Zhang-*ge*? What would he be busy with?" Hai chuckles as he eats his lunch. "Salinger's rumors bring much more publicity than the music video, and fans buy to help the band top charts, so he couldn't be happier. He's just pretending to be upset," Hai continues, lowering his voice. "It's Stone who's really upset..."

Stone is sitting right behind the table, his box lunch untouched in front of him. He just puffs at his cigarette, looking at his phone. Stone and Salinger are two extremes: Salinger has nothing written on his face, while Stone has everything written on his face, and you can tell by the tight frown on his face how annoyed he is right now. It is not hard to understand his mood. He wants to search the Internet for feedback on the new album and new songs, but every entry turns out to be about Salinger's scandal. This situation has gone on for five years. If I were Stone, I would probably be cranky, too.

The door opens and Salinger pushes his way in. The air freezes for a moment. No one makes a sound. Salinger sees Stone at the end of the table. Without saying anything, he comes over and takes the lunch box before heading out himself.

A kingdom can't have two kings. For 48 hours straight, Salinger and Stone do not see each other. Salinger won't show up whenever Stone is in the room, and Stone doesn't show up whenever Salinger is there. They even sit in separate nanny vans. LOTUS always has two nanny vans; they used to sit in the same one.

When I go out, Salinger is sitting alone on the steps of the stairwell eating his meal with a bottle of Fu Bao Spring Water by his side. In October, the weather is getting cooler. The stairwell window leaks wind, so he puts up the collar of his jacket. As he turns to get his lunch box, he accidentally knocks over the bottle of Fu Bao Spring Water next to him, which falls through the gap between the stairs. Salinger closes his eyes at the dull sound of it hitting the ground, looking as if *the second shoe has finally dropped*.

I don't call out to him. Instead, I run downstairs to the vending machine to buy a can of hot corn chowder, but when I come back, I don't see Salinger. I push open the security door, but the hallway is empty. Then I look downstairs. I thought he has gone to fetch the bottle of water, and find it a bit sad for a rock star to stay in a leaky stairwell and eat alone when he hasn't committed any heinous crimes.

But no one is downstairs, and I don't see the bottle of water. I am confused, and think to myself, "*Did he pick it up and finish eating this quickly? I already ran quite fast."* I even pull open the security door and look behind it. Facing the empty corner, I wonder if I am out of my mind.

"Looking for someone?"

Suddenly, Salinger's voice comes from upstairs. Startled, I look up as Salinger looks down from upstairs, at which point I realize I have gone downstairs to the vending machine to buy water, so of course he isn't on the same floor.

"What are you looking for behind the door? Is that where I would hide?" The collar of his jacket is still up, hiding the dimples of his smile. "I'm not Ji Shi."

I laugh, too. I guess fanboying really damages brains, but it's worth it if you can get a laugh out of your idol by being stupid once in a while.

I go upstairs to bring him the water. Salinger takes a look at the corn chowder, unscrews it, takes a sip, and sits down again on the stairs. *Tap.* With the can by his side, he keeps eating his meal with ease, head resting between his shoulders. I am wrong. There is nothing to feel sorry about for him. Even sitting in this situation, he is still the carefree, dashing bassist of the band that can adapt to anything. He always makes me feel proud to be his fan.

I look at the window in the hallway that opens from the bottom. "This window looks like it can be closed."

I want to close it, but Salinger raises his hand to stop me. "Don't bother. I've tried it. It won't close."

If he can't close it, then I certainly can't either. He just eats his meal in the cold wind for a while before suddenly sneering, putting down his chopsticks and staring at the box of nearly finished rice.

"What?" I ask, curious.

Salinger holds the empty lunchbox in both hands, examining it. "I made him so cranky he can't eat and probably can't sleep well. Yet here I am, eating and sleeping cozily myself. I'll probably be able to live just fine even if the world ends and everyone's dead..."

He stretches his legs, stands up and throws the lunchbox into the bin.

His phone rings at that moment. Salinger takes it out for a glance, answering with a blank face, "What is it?"

It is probably quiet enough in the stairwell that I can hear Xu Zhang's voice without much difficulty. "Have you checked Weibo yet?"

Salinger is bending down to pick up the bottle of corn chowder on the stairs when he pauses at the words, then gets up. "No."

"Ren Meilun admitted that you two had been dating. Go read her agent's statement. Also, I've just spoken to Stone and will be taking two show deals for you guys in order to turn people's attention back to the new album. He's agreed to be on them."

In other words, *you don't get to say no*.

“Okay, as long as *he* wants to be on it.”

He hangs up and opens Weibo. The safety staircase stands hushed in his silence. I assume he would read it for a while, so I intend to give him some space, but he finishes it quickly, reacting with nothing other than slightly deeper breaths, then he tucks his phone away and says to me, “Let’s go.”

Walking out the door, he suddenly stops and turns to me, holding up the corn chowder can. “How much is it?”

What does he mean, asking me that out of the blue?

“Emm...” I hesitate. “I forgot.”

“From now on, just bill me directly for anything you buy. Don’t pile it up until a month later. I’ve noticed you are quite forgetful.”

“I don’t have a habit of bookkeeping.”

Who can remember so well? Sometimes when Salinger asks me, I have to improvise a few entries for things like water or cigarettes and stuff.

“You’ll starve yourself to death this way.”

“It’s pennies. You don’t have to be so formal and polite with me, Lin Sai-*ge*. It’s not like you asked me to buy it. I bought it myself. It’s on me!”

Salinger looks at the corn chowder and smiles. “Thanks for the treat. It’s delicious.”

After the rumors about the relationship between Salinger and Ren Meilun broke out, many people think they are still dating. Ren Meilun’s agent then posts a short statement on Weibo, admitting that Ren Meilun and Salinger had briefly dated, but broke up a long time ago. Since the relationship did not last long, they decided there was no reason to say anything about it, and hope that people will care more about her new drama and respect the artist’s private life.

Stone must have seen it too. He most likely also saw the irritating comments below.

--I thought Salinger is a big fan of dating older women? Why did he find a younger one this time?

--His last girlfriend, Chen Xue, was also younger than him, though only by two months. Apart from those two, he does seem to prefer to bang older ones.

--Watch your mouth, will you? What are you going on about, “banging” this “banging” that I’ll bang yo mamma.

--Salinger is totally a jerk. Why are these actresses so desperate to jump into the fire pit? Hasn’t Ren Meilun heard of Salinger’s shady reputation?

--It’s perfectly normal. Women can be seduced by guys with looks, too. Many can’t resist Salinger’s type. Look at those actresses; even those with lots more experience have fallen for Salinger. How can Ren Meilun resist?

--How is he a jerk? Since when is being in relationships a “shady history”? Is he a homewrecker? Does he cheat? Does he have one-night stands?

--LOTUS debuted five years ago. In all this time, I only know of about five girlfriends he's had, which isn't a lot.

--You already said that's "what you know of", which means that's just the ones publicly acknowledged. Who knows how many more he hasn't admitted?

--Ren Meilun's agent said they broke up a long time ago. That photo was taken on May 27th. It's only October now. If they just broke up, then it's only four months, but then they said they broke up a long time ago; does that mean they had only been dating for two or three months? Jesus! They met during the Truth or Dare shoot. I guess they probably split before that episode even aired. Is Salinger looking for a girlfriend or just a fuck buddy?

--Relationships don't make him a jerk, you're right, but it's the playboy attitude that makes Salinger a jerk. He really shatters my first impression of him. I always thought he would be a very devoted kind of guy because his eyes are deeply affectionate in a mysterious way. He said he is dating this girl today, but before I've even had time to come out of my loss, he's already said they'd broken up. Before I've had the time to rejoice for much longer, tomorrow he'll be flirting with another girl. Stanning him is like sitting on the edge every day. I can't do this anymore. Now I've retired from the fangirl life. I'll just enjoy his handsome face...

--"Fuck buddy" is a bit harsh. In the photo they leaked this time, do you notice Salinger waited until Ren Meilun entered the building before driving away? He kept his eyes on her back until she disappeared from his view. A man who does that doesn't seem like someone who would just use a girl for a fuck.

--Salinger has a particularly large number of groupies and fans who only care about his face, at least a hundred times more than those who like his music. This is no exaggeration. I wonder if this is a curse or a blessing for him.

--I'm a follower of Salinger and I think he is a bit of a player, but not a jerk. There are too many cheating jerks in showbiz. I won't drop names, but now they're all clearing their names. Salinger ends a relationship before starting another one. This is nothing. It's just that he has so much gossip. The paparazzi somehow just love to hunt for it, and it's hard to tell if it's true or not. It feels like he was born with this romantic nature, plus he's too popular, so every time gossip comes out, the reaction is even greater than when someone else is caught cheating.

--Yeah, and the No.1 Band in the Universe always acts low key, acting like them rockers are too cool for you mortals, but then every time they release an album, it's tied to a Salinger scandal...Every single time!

--So true. However many albums can LOTUS release, Salinger will have just as many rumored relationships. We stan. Everything for the band!

--From now on, when LOTUS releases an EP, Salinger will go on the show and have a flirty interaction with a female guest; when LOTUS releases an album, Salinger will be in a three-month relationship; when LOTUS goes on tour, Salinger will release a sex tape. There are so many female artists in the entertainment industry. Go Salinger! LOTUS, release as many songs as you can while Salinger is still at the peak of his beauty and form!

--If they're going to reveal Salinger's sex tape, I'd beg for concerts rather than songs PLEASE!

--Hahahahahaha, the new album is actually quite good, but I can't listen to it anymore because of what you guys are saying!

--How come this shitty band is still so popular? They sing like a car wreck. All they have is looks and gossip.

I turn off Weibo and go to a music forum to search for the new LOTUS album, where I finally find good feedback. Ratings for *"Wish It Is Love"* are relatively polarized. Some feel that the song is a breakthrough for Salinger, as he rarely writes songs on romantic themes like this. It is surprising that when he finally does, it really hits the teenage girls in all of us. Others feel that it is just a trashy song that Salinger put on the album to make up the numbers, nothing to write home about.

More popular is another one of his; the metal-influenced *"I Don't Care,"* which receives almost unanimous acclaim and is renamed by followers as "Mind Your Own Fucking Business" in Chinese. Fans comment saying *"Kneeling down listening to Salinger scolding me"* and *"The No.1 Band in the Universe singing in English is surprisingly good."*

Overall, it is a well-appreciated album, both for Stone's works and Salinger's works.

If only Stone could see these.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Xu Zhang has arranged two promo shows for LOTUS, one of which is a well-known variety show that has remained popular for twenty years and is very effective in terms of promoting new works. LOTUS will perform their new songs on the show.

I intentionally sit next to Stone at lunch, looking for an opportunity to let him know there is such a forum where he can see the positive side of things. This website has blown up in the last two years, but it is a private forum, so he might not know about it. I pretend to scroll on my phone with my head down while I am eating. Stone is also looking at his phone. It isn't even two seconds before he tosses it aside.

I then work up my courage and say in a faux casual tone, "Stone-*ge*, the new album seems to be receiving great responses..."

"Stop exaggerating!"

He snaps at me. I mean to say "pretty good," but I got my tongue twisted.

"It *is* really good. The responses on this site have been great!"

Please look over here, Stone! I'll start spitting blood if you don't take the bait...

Luckily, Stone takes a curious glance and asks with a frown, "What's this website?"

I hurriedly move toward him and hand him my phone. "It's a rather private music forum, but the traffic is massive. Look at all these hits and replies, they're not fake! And here's the user—-"

“Chi Nan,” Stone interrupts me, “are you the founder of this website?”

“Huh? No.”

“Then why are you so eager to sell it?”

I’m at a loss for words, blaming myself for trying too hard and fearing that I’m going to ruin it. I didn’t expect that, after a while, Stone gives it a thought and says, “Send me the link.”

“Okay!”

Then he barely touches his food anymore, concentrating on the forum. Although there is a lot of hater slang in there—such as calling LOTUS the No.1 Band in the Universe and using “car crash” to describe Ji Shi’s live—nevertheless, this is a forum grounded in music itself, and many of the seeming haters are actually true fans. I have a feeling Stone would like this forum.

I peek at his face. He looks calm, so hopefully he can forgive Salinger, seeing as the album is getting good feedback and people are very positive about Salinger’s work.

Friday in Love is a show LOTUS went on for several episodes when they first debuted, but this is the first time after all these years. I don’t know if it is a coincidence or not, but the producer has arranged a game session to test the band’s bonding, asking each member to fill in the answers in advance, and the questions are all related to other team members to test how well they know each other.

The game is played with one person answering in front and the other four standing behind. If the answer is different from the answer written by the other four, flower pots will fall down in punishment of the four; if the answer is not given within five seconds, the flower pots will also fall. The flower pots look quite large, not much smaller than a head, but they are made of plastic and they aren’t hung too high above the participants. They slowly rise as the game proceeds. The crew behind them is responsible for loosening the ropes so they aren’t lowered too fast, but they still look rather scary.

The first person to answer a question is Ji Shi. The MC asks, “What is your height...?”

Ji Shi gives a resounding, “2.8 meters!”

Before the four of them can react, they are all hit by the flower pots—but Salinger dodges backwards, probably because he hears “2.”

Stone and Alan are shouting at Ji Shi, “Are you nuts?”

Ji Shi happily says to the MC, “I love this game.”

The offstage director says something to the MC, who is apologetic as she says to Salinger, “Salinger, you can’t dodge in this session. You have to stand there and get smashed.”

Ji Shi laughs so hard he slides right out of his seat. Deserving of his status as the lead vocal of a rock band, his laughter alone drowns out the laughter of the audience in the room.

Alan immediately runs behind the board and says to the MC, “Can I drop the pot on him, please?

The MC laughs. “Your band is really not getting along!”

Salinger turns around. “Wait a—”

Before he can finish his sentence, the flower pot falls and hits him on the head with a *thud*. The female fans on stage are all a bit torn between laughing and feeling sorry for their idol. There is something so funny about the way Salinger is caught off-guard by the smash. The staff does it by lowering the rope, but Alan isn’t loosening the rope at all; he just lets it go straight away, and the flower pot hits Salinger before landing on the ground, tumbling. Salinger, who is always steady in his standing position, wobbles a little from the smash.

Xiaoxiao tries to hold her laughter as she looks down on at laughing audience under the stage. “They’re all fake fans! The one in the second row holding up the Salinger light board—the light board is falling because of their laughter!”

“Next question,” the MC asks. “What’s your favorite animal?”

“Minions!”

Thud, thud, thud, thud. The flower pots drop again.

Stone is on the brink of exploding. “Animals! Animal! Are you dumb?”

The game is so pleasant that even Stone seems to have forgotten his troubles because of his anger. One of the questions is “favorite food,” and Salinger answers “nori roll sushi,” resulting in four colorful flower pots flying down and the team being smashed. The four of them all protest.

Stone says, “How come it’s nori roll sushi?!”

Ji Shi retorts, “Aren’t you not picky about what you eat?!”

The MC goes through the answers. “You all gave the same answer to this question, which is ‘nothing in particular,’ but it turns out that he loves nori roll sushi. How well do you know Salinger?”

Alan shouts, “No, he’s really not picky about what he eats! I’ve never seen him say he wants nori rolls! Trust me! He’s just doing it on purpose!”

Even the team leader Li Xiang can’t help but nod. “It’s true. He’s never mentioned sushi when asked what he wants to eat, not even Japanese food. That answer is quite unexpected.”

Ji Shi says, “What’s surprising about him giving random answers? I once asked him what he’s afraid of and he said he’s afraid of cockroaches. But last time he saw a cockroach, he even knelt down and said, ‘Wow, it’s a big one’!”

The MC says, “So that’s why you wrote that he is fearless, hahahahah! Did he step on that cockroach afterwards?”

All four shout in unison, “No!”

Stone says, “I told him to step on it, but he kept stalling there and finally the cockroach ran away on its own.”

Alan interrupts Stone. “No, he was totally covering that cockroach and helping it run away. His foot was like this...” He imitates Salinger, teetering on his toes and losing his balance slightly. “That cockroach could have been an old lady and still would have run away long before!”

The MC is amused and puzzled, and says, “You can have stepped on it yourselves!”

Ji Shi says, “He’s the one who said he would step on it! How can he be afraid of cockroaches? If he really likes nori roll sushi, how come we never saw him eat it? Shouldn’t you punish those who lie on this show?”

Salinger looks behind them, clutching his arms and not responding to anything, facing his bandmates who are about to explode. He is particularly calm. The MC looks over to Salinger, then suddenly stands up, walking forward and hugging Salinger’s shoulders.

The fans are screaming offstage. After a moment, she releases Salinger and says contentedly, “We don’t punish the one answering the questions.”

Salinger looks unsurprised by the hug and even nods to the MC. Alan and Stone are going crazy.

“Tanglin, I was wrong about you!”

“Salinger, are you enjoying yourself?”

When he said he liked nori roll sushi, no one—from his teammates to his assistant to the fans offstage—believed him. They all thought he is making it up. In fact, even I thought he would say there is nothing in particular that he loves to eat. Whether he is deliberately trying to fool his teammates or he genuinely likes the restaurant owner’s nori roll sushi, the answer is a pleasant little surprise to me. Even if Hai and the others don’t believe it, I don’t seem to want to tell them. I don’t quite want to share the secret.

“Next question,” says the MC, “if you were to drift to a desolate island and could only take one thing with you, what would you take?”

“Probably an astronomical telescope.”

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

“Damn!” Stone gets smashed. “What’s wrong with Guitar Bass Davidoff Survival Guide for the Wilderness?! Do you have to bring an astronomical telescope?!”

“Why bring an astronomical telescope?” Tanglin is also confused.

“No reason, just to smash us!”

Salinger ignores Alan’s noise. “I’ve always wanted to go to a wild island and see the stars.”

Ji Shi shouts, “You liar!”

Stone echoes, “A serious load of bollocks!”

Only Tanglin looks at him with interest. “Look at the stars, seriously?”

“Well, if it’s a desolate island in the northern hemisphere, I’d look at the Big Dipper. If it’s in the southern hemisphere...”

He seems to get stuck for a moment, and Alan immediately guffaws. “What do you look at on a desolate island in the southern hemisphere? Say what you’re looking at! Cat got your tongue?”

Salinger looks to Tanglin. “Just look at the Southern Cross, the Centauri, the Magellanic Clouds big and small...there’s plenty to see.”

Alan gasps in surprise. His mouth could have been stuffed with goose eggs. Salinger’s trap is tailor-made for him. He made sure to wait for him to get carried away first, then lightly smacks him in the face and sits back and watches him be baffled.

Hai shrugs his shoulders ironically. “Who told you to smash him at that time; don’t you know he’s very mischievous?”

Xiaoxiao sighs. “Ugh, I feel so bad for my boss. His hair is ruined. Every time he gets smashed, he squats like he’s a mole in Whack-A-Mole...”

Tanglin chuckles as she reads the next question. “This one is sort of relates to the previous one. If you were drifting to a desolate island and could only take one person with you, who would you take?”

“I’ll take...”

Everyone waits for him to say something outrageous, but Salinger doesn’t continue, as if he has thought of something that puts a frown on his brow. No one rushes him, even the four men under the flower pots resigned to their fate. Everyone is waiting for him to make his move at the last second, but Salinger just stays silent for four seconds…and the last second, too.

Stone makes a gesture of resignation and lets the four flowerpots fall down with glee. Alan lets out a gasp of pain. Those of us standing offstage are caught off-guard. It seems that the edge of the flowerpot has broken, and a jagged edge has hit the back of his head, so Hai runs up in a panic and the shoot is halted. Luckily, it doesn’t seem to be serious—no cuts or bleeding, just a rather painful bump. Tanglin asks if they want to take a break downstairs and let the three of them finish playing.

Alan says, “*Aiya*, rockers aren’t that delicate. You guys are making too much of a fuss!”

The fans applaud offstage as Alan goes back under a new pot of flowers and says to Salinger, “Come on! The Andromeda drummer can take a bit of bumping!”

The show goes back to shooting.

“There’s just one last question left,” Tanglin looks at the question in her hand and then looks at the four with a sympathetic glance. “I think you might be smashed to the end by Salinger, so how about this—for this question, even if just one of you four gets it right, it will count as a pass.”

The four people on the stage still look as if their hope has gone out of the window.

Xiaoxiao shakes her head. “This is tragic...”

Tanglin looks at Salinger's back as she reads, "Please describe yourself in three words."

Stone spreads out his hands. "We are done for."

Everyone thought that is the case. The chances of getting this question right are too slim.

"King of Filth."

A few seconds later, none of the flowerpots fall, and for once all of them finally pass. The four men look at each other in disbelief.

Hai looks grateful. "Salinger-*oppa* let Alan off the hook, yay!"

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

Chatting to the guests after the game session regarding these questions, Tanglin looks at the statistics. "When we were playing, I couldn't tell who got more right answers and who got more wrong, but now I'm a bit surprised to see the person with the most correct answers out of five."

Stone asks, "Who is it?"

Tanglin stalls for a moment, glancing around at the five men and finally settling on Salinger. The whole room lets out an incredulous "Ohhhhhh." But I am not surprised—why should anyone be surprised?

"Out of 80 questions, he got 73 correct, with a correct rate of over 90%, surpassing second place Li Xiang by 21.25%. He even managed to remember the license plate number! Li Xiang got 56 questions right! The leader is also impressive. Most of the wrong answers were in response to Salinger's questions."

Tanglin looks at the data and shakes her head.

"No wonder he's smashing you guys. You've been dragging him down! The person with the lowest correct rate is Alan—you only got 7 questions right, not even 10%. How little do you know your teammates? But one of the questions you got right is so weird—you were the only one who wrote 'King of Filth' for Salinger's last question."

Tanglin looks back and forth between Salinger and Alan. "So what does Filthy King mean, anyway?"

Not waiting for Salinger to say anything, Alan gushes, "It's a long story. Some fans write fanfiction of us, you know? Have you read any of it? Sometimes there's also erotic stuff in there..."

When Tanglin says she hasn't read it, Alan continues, "God, it's all super R18 content! This part will be cut when it's aired, right?"

Stone and Li Xiang fail at hinting him to stop, while Tanglin seems interested. "Well, it will be cut, so be bold and tell us who you're banging in those fanfics."

Alan's head shakes like a rattle. "I never read stories about me. I'd be traumatized if I did. I just read theirs."

"Whose?"

“Mainly Salinger and Ji Shi, Salinger and Stone... Salinger is the top, always.”

The screams of the fans offstage are getting out of control.

Alan says to the fans, “I’d like to find a story where he’s the bottom. When are you guys going to write one? Don’t always have him top and banging someone else...”

Tanglin asks Salinger with excitement, “Have you read your own fanfic?”

Salinger replies no.

Alan pushes him, “Don’t trust him. I’ve sent him a few, specifically for him!”

Salinger rolls his eyes subtly and purses his lips, going silent.

Alan is still describing vividly how erotic the fanfiction is—how Salinger can do it seven times a night, in all kinds of positions, and make his partners cry. As he gets into the dirty details, Stone is so furious that the veins at his forehead are about to explode. Then Salinger gets up from the couch, walking over to the cameraman and asking him to please turn that way. As he says that, he is already forcing the camera to face the other way.

He then covers the mic pinned to his collar, and says to Alan, “Keep talking and I’ll make you cry here and now.”

He doesn’t say it loudly. It is a little lower than his usual speaking voice. Only the fans in the front row and those of us close by hear it, probably; they’re all whispering excitedly. The fans in the back row are whispering and busy asking the front row what Salinger has said. The fans probably think Salinger is joking, but after the previous incident, Alan no longer dares to piss Salinger off again so he immediately drops the subject.

It is almost seven when they finish shooting, so we all fix dinner together first. Salinger and Ji Shi head back to the nanny van after dinner, while Stone and Alan are still drinking.

In the nanny van, Ji Shi asks Salinger curiously, “Why didn’t you answer the question about taking someone to a desolate island?”

I am also curious, and can’t help but perk up my ears.

“I was guessing whether you’d say Spider Man or Iron Man,” Ji Shi says.

Salinger suddenly asks, “How’s your date getting on?”

The lead singer of the universe immediately forgets what he asked and changes the subject. “Ugh, slow in progress!” Ji Shi leans back in his chair a little.

“How do you know you like him?” Salinger asks.

“I just find him cute—as in super cute and sweet, you know?”

Salinger is silent for a while. Only Ji Shi rambles on. I thought I’d better not listen and am about to put on my headphones when there is a rustle in the back seat. Salinger leans over, tapping me.

“Chi Nan, would you mind getting a pack of cigarettes for me?”

"Oh, yeah!"

I hastily get up and flee the nanny van, where a conversation not fit for my ears is going on.

It doesn't take long for Stone and Salinger to make up, and everyone is relieved. Although Xiaoxiao says these two are always like this—whenever they fall out, they always make up within two days—but I think there is also credit to Xu Zhang. He doesn't ask them to go on *Friday in Love* just to promote their album. It is not easy to be an agent, especially for LOTUS.

The new album is selling well. LOTUS gives out a signed copy to every assistant as a gift. When I go to the office, Xiaoxiao hands me my copy of the signed limited-edition CD with a simple blue-sky-and-white-clouds front cover and the image of a dark night on the back. The cover is simple but fitting. Stone and Salinger are like the two sides of the band—Stone gives LOTUS popularity and catchiness, Salinger gives LOTUS soul and artistry. Just like day and night.

I have already bought one for myself, but I've been too busy these two days to find time to listen to it from the top. I go home and unpack the CD and try to listen to it with headphones on, but I end up turning on the speakers. The sound is a bit low, so I can't hear many details. Instead, I have to rely on my imagination while I listen to the songs. As I read the lyric book, I freeze for a moment when I get to the song *"Wish It Is Love,"* thinking I read it wrong.

But next to "composers," it really does say "Salinger & Chi Nan."

I am blown away when I finally make sure I get every letter right. My name is on it! Although Salinger said he would put me on there, I know it isn't up to him. I was surprised when the song was voted into the album and even more so when I received the song-writing fee, but I was prepared for the possibility that my name wouldn't be on it.

But it is actually in print. How did that happen?

I am too excited to think about it now. I just want to take a picture of this page with a DSLR and get the photo framed! I'll build a cabin on the beach and hang it next to my bed, listening to the sound of the tide and playing this song.

I won't be able to hear by then, I guess. But I can still hang it above my bed. Most importantly, my name has appeared next to his. Not many fans in this world can say that, right?

That's amazing, Chi Nan!

The next day, I go to Salinger's a little earlier. When I arrive, the house is quiet. He is probably still asleep. I want to thank him in person, but I am not sure I can wait for him to get up, so I plan to leave a note on the fridge.

The table is bathing in sunshine, making you want to spill all your beans. Besides thanking him, I can't help but write some thoughts on the new album. As I wasn't involved in the whole recording process, this is the first time I've heard all the completed tracks, and it is the first LOTUS album I've witnessed flourish out of nothing, so there are a lot of surprises. Plus, I haven't even told him formally how

much I like the five songs he wrote.

I am about to write the fourth page when I stop myself, because there is only one sticky note left on the pad. I didn't realize I've written three, but I think better of it. I am not writing an essay.

It ends up being just one line—*Lin Sai-ge, I got the signed CD and saw my name in the lyric book, thank you!*

Afterwards, I go into the workshop as usual to clean up. The music sheets are willfully strewn all over the place as usual.

Ms. Zhang once complained to me, "Nan, I don't know why, but I think he's gotten more careless when he writes ever since you got here. Look at this table full of sheets. He used to pile his sheets in two or three fixed places at least..." Shaking her head again, she continued, "Men just shouldn't be spoiled; celebrities even less so."

"It's fine, two or three places or a dozen places, it's no different when tidying."

"What if one day you stop being his assistant? Who's going to put them away for him then? He'll have to learn to clean up after himself."

I felt a punch in my chest immediately at Ms. Zhang's thoughtless sentence. That day is going to come eventually, but I don't want to think about it. I always tell myself that people should live in the moment and not think too much about the future. No one can say what will happen.

The future is unpredictable, except for the cold fact that I will be deaf.

Bending down to pick up the first piece of music sheet, I slowly read through it. The jumbled thoughts in my head get squeezed out by those squiggly tadpoles. Somewhat surprisingly, it is a practice piece, just for one instrument—but it is not a guitar score, nor a piano score, nor a full score, but the score for a single instrument. It is only when I read further that I recognize that it is written for a cello.

The phrase on the last line of this page, though cut off in the middle, is indeed a classic passage from Libertango. Salinger is using this melody to practice the way cello can be written. I bend down on the floor again and find the entire cello score, which has many variation passages. He even tried to mark the finger positions, which is difficult to figure out for someone who does not know how to play the cello. It is so fascinating to see—Salinger seems to have been born with an innate talent for musical instruments. I wouldn't be surprised if he were to write for an orchestra at some point.

It is almost time to go home after sorting out the scores. Ms. Zhang has the day off, so I step out of the heavy soundproof door to the studio and see a glass of water on the small table at the bar.

It wasn't there before, was it?

The wind breezes through the shutters, and a row of small yellow pieces of paper on the table flutter like piano keys. I don't see Salinger, but the water on the table is proof that he has just come downstairs. He was probably thirsty, looking for a drink. After he got it, he went back up to sleep. When I walk over, there on the table are the four pages of notes I had thrown away in the trash, flattened out and lined up on the dining room table. My brief thank you note is still on the fridge, untouched, but these four have been pulled out of the bin and read carefully.

I can’t resist touching the glass, which is still lukewarm. While I was learning cello scores in the workshop, Salinger was probably standing around the table in his robe, drinking water and reading incoherent messages from a fanboy at around the same time.

He seems to have a natural disinclination toward looking at what is plainly laid out. He is more fascinated by well-hidden clues. Somehow, I am reminded of what he said to me that day in the stairwell about wanting to teach me the way to deal with him.

An idol that would go through the bin like this is indeed hard for a fan to deal with, but I don’t want to hold up my guard against that at all. It seems that whatever he does, he only draws me in with that air of mystery, and whatever he does, he only gives me pleasant surprises and endless satisfaction.

TRACK 15

A week after the release of the new album, Xu Zhang gets the sales statistics. Not only are the physical album sales impressive, even the online sales have broken the record of the last album. The label is organizing their usual celebration party for LOTUS, to be attended by all of LOTUS's staff and no label executives. Almost the whole company knows the band doesn't like to entertain the higher-ups.

It seems that the person everyone fears the most at parties is Stone, who apparently has an excellent talent for pushing you to drink. I can't help but be impressed after seeing it with my own eyes. He can stare at you as you finish your shot, find a different reason to make you have to drink every glass. He is even more persistent when he is drunk himself. A chill goes down my spine as I see his gaze pass over Xiaoxiao and land on me.

I quickly say, "Stone-*ge*, I have to drive!"

Stone laughs and taps me on my shoulder. "Why are you so nervous? You can't even hold your chopsticks steady. So much for being the self-composed one. I know you're driving!"

I am so relieved that he is letting me go. If he got me, I wouldn't have been able to escape without having three shots in a row.

Stone makes the rounds. Almost no one escapes who isn't driving, except for Salinger, who doesn't touch a drop of alcohol. Eventually, Stone singles him out.

"Salinger, everyone drank. If you don't drink, you're not showing me any respect!"

He is already drunk and loud, plus it is in front of a large number of staff members. He is standing right behind the round table, holding his glass up to Salinger across the table, who is leaning back in his chair looking at him. The two men are facing each other for a while. The whole room goes quiet.

Hai lowers his voice. "Want to bet if Salinger-*oppa* drinks or not?"

"He definitely won't drink." Xiaoxiao is confident. "He never drank all those times Stone got mad at him for not drinking."

Standing there with his glass raised, Stone is a little awkward, so he sweeps his gaze across the table and coughs. "Did you forget you promised me before, that when we release an album you won't be caught—"

Salinger stands up, grabs the glass and drains it. The twist comes unexpectedly. Xiaoxiao drops her jaw, her mouth still wrapped around a crystal shrimp dumpling.

Stone sits down in satisfaction and cranes his neck. "There's not a single soul in the world that I can't persuade to drink, even Salinger. He'll still have to drink when I tell him to!"

It strikes fear into everyone.

Stone sits up again all of a sudden and says to everyone around him, "Do you believe I can get him to down one more?" And with that, he looks at Salinger again, "Gee, look at the beastly eyes, *but I'm not afraid of you, Animal Boy*—"

That last sentence, he sings. For a moment, awkwardness fills the room, because the lyrics come from a sexy electro dance song called “Hot and Dangerous” by the queen of pop Gu Sunny, who is Salinger’s first rumored girlfriend. She is nine years older than Salinger. Their relationship was the only one of Salinger’s that lasted as long as six months. Because of this affair, *xuejie* was down for a long time back then. Although the song does not make it too explicit, many people guessed that it was written about Salinger—when asked, Gu Sunny just laughed but never denied it.

It is already very rare to remain friends even after a peaceful breakup, But Gu Sunny even asked Salinger for help in arranging songs when they starred on *The Best Live*. Nor do the two avoid mentioning each other. But the fact that Stone is singing this song right now shows that he is still more or less blaming Salinger. I guess the drinks are revealing his true feelings.

Stone is walking back and forth on our side of the seats. Leisurely, he points at Salinger and says to Ji Shi, “This guy is a human telescopic sight! I’ll see how long he can keep peering at me. Don’t you dare blink! Wow, he really doesn’t! You’ve got bloodshot eyes, Lin-*didi*[20]!”

Ji Shi holds onto the back of his chair, laughing. And so, the awkward atmosphere morphs into a sitcom. I am always glad to have Ji Shi in LOTUS at such times—even the most awkward atmosphere would disintegrate in the face of the No. 1 lead singer’s manic laughter.

After three rounds of drinks, I go to the restroom. On my way back, I catch Stone’s voice from afar.

“Salinger, you’re a real piece of work. You wait until the master tape has been taken to production to tell me the bridge was written by Chi Nan. You thought I didn’t know you did it on purpose, didn’t you...”

Dazed, I stop just outside the door. No wonder. So he acted before he reported… It is obviously against the rules, but I can’t help but feel touched at that moment.

Stone picks up his glass as he says, “You know what I’m gonna say, right?”

Salinger grabs the glass and downs it.

Ji Shi claps. “A round of applause for Salinger-*oppa*’s personal breakthrough!”

The whole room applauds politely. I am afraid that Stone will continue to pour him more drinks, so I am about to push the door open when I see Stone sitting next to Salinger, saying in a concerned tone, “Why did you use Chi Nan’s bridge? You could have written one yourself.”

Alan teases, “You wouldn’t even spare a male assistant, would you, Salinger?”

I just stand in the doorway. Several times I start to enter and stop, feeling like an eavesdropper. Behind me, the waiters coming and going have already looked at me several times. That is awkward enough, yet now it is even more so. But I am still curious to know Salinger’s answer.

Salinger puts his right hand on the table and tilts his head, saying, “Daddy didn’t hear you; say that again?”

Alan raises his hands in surrender and hides behind Ji Shi.

“I have to make this clear,” says Salinger. “I used the bridge he wrote because it was incredibly well-written. No other reason. And of course, I could have written a bridge of my own and discarded his. Do you think I didn’t consider it? But I can’t imagine how else this bridge could look, other than this.” He looks to Stone. “Get it? It’s just that perfect.”

Stone doesn’t say anything. I look at Salinger’s back. He is still speaking with clear logic, but his words are completely slurred. Every time he sputters the word “bridge” it sounds like a series of plosives, but no one dares to laugh. However, when he says, “it’s just that perfect,” he seems to have broken away from the influence of alcohol.

“Why settle for second best for the sake of copyright when you can have it perfect?” He finishes by pressing his hands on the edge of the table and looks around at everyone. “Are you satisfied?”

Everyone nods.

“What are you nodding for? Applaud if you are satisfied,” he adds.

That is funny and exasperating to watch—Salinger is leaning back in his chair to everyone’s clapping. He rubs at his temples, eyes still roving the room to see who isn’t clapping, looking especially devilish.

Stone finally sighs. “I know Chi Nan is quite talented, but you have to understand, he’s not a member of our band after all. You’d better not look for inspiration from him next time. If you value his talents, it’s fine to let him back us up. To be honest, I can appreciate his talent, too, but you can’t mess around with the copyright stuff. Get it?”

A drunken Salinger turns his head to look at him and says no.

“Stop pretending you don’t get it!”

“He’s my assistant and fan. His music style has been influenced by me, so how is he an outsider?”

Stone ruffles his hair. “Lin-*didi*, of course he is an outsider.”

That seems to ruffle the look in Salinger’s eyes, too. He looks even more confused, lowering his eyelashes as if he has fallen back into his own world. I want to enter the room, but as the subject of discussion, it seems inappropriate to enter now, so I have to linger outside the door and watch Salinger remain in that unconscious state until he can’t hold himself up and collapses on the table.

The atmosphere in the room is relaxing and cozy. People are enjoying their desserts and fruit. There is lively chatter and group photos. No one notices when I walk in. Salinger quietly rests on the round table, the seat next to him already empty. Again, no one notices when I sit down.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, thank you.”

For everything you’ve done for me.

I say it so softly, barely louder than my heartbeat, but his shoulders lift, and he looks up at me. His eyes, out of focus from being slightly tipsy, briefly clear in that moment.

He whispers over the noise, “You’re back?”

I nod at him. *I'm sorry, Salinger, for leaving you here to be interrogated by them for so long.*

The way that man, obviously already drunk and with bloodshot eyes, tries to respond to me as he always does, hits me like a bullet.

It is almost eleven o'clock when the drinking finally ends. Salinger seems to be a bad drinker; he probably drank the least out of all of them, but is suffering the most. I go to help him as he is about to leave, but he gently pushes me away.

"No, I can walk."

But as soon as he gets up and pushes the chair away, the chair falls backwards onto the floor and crushes Ji Shi's feet, who squats and hugs his feet in pain.

"Handsome Sai, did you do that on purpose?"

Salinger turns around and lifts the chair up. He puts it down on one side with a bang and it almost falls over again. I hastily hold it in place as he walks over to Ji Shi and kneels down, holding Ji Shi's face with his hands.

"I'm sorry."

As Ji Shi freezes, Salinger rubs his face like a cat. "I didn't mean to do that."

Ji Shi jumps away. "Get the fuck away from me, Salinger!"

Crouched on the ground, hands empty, Salinger has an innocent look on his face. He looks up at Ji Shi, whose feet no longer hurt. The latter gets up, hands pressed to his knees. Salinger wisely moves away from Ji Shi, then turns back to me.

"It's better if you carry me."

I help Salinger out of the booth and hear Ji Shi shouting behind me. "Holy crap, his sexuality is definitely a mystery! That's scary! He must be drunkenly rubbing boys' faces like that a lot! Be careful, Chi Nan; he even asked me last time if straight..."

His voice is gone in a flash as Salinger suddenly covers my ears with both hands. I know he is drunk, but the action is still a bit sudden. I am no less surprised than Ji Shi when he had his face rubbed, but Salinger ignores me and keeps walking forward, hands covering my ears.

He is walking quite fast. Drunk as he is, his pace is ridiculously steady. As he enters the lift, Ji Shi shouts from behind, "Handsome Sai, wait for us!"

Salinger's arm crosses over me and presses the closing button twice, shutting out Ji Shi and Xiaoxiao who are rushing over. I look at the closing doors with a little confusion.

"Lin Sai-*ge*, didn't you want to wait for...them?"

Salinger leans against the lift wall, staring at the numbers until they start to slide down, before shrugging his shoulders at me and saying, "Too late."

I just nod and turn my head to watch the numbers go down. The smooth lift wall reflects the blurred figure of Salinger standing behind me. His expression isn't visible. There is just him looking impassive, with his arms crossed, leaning against

the wall.

"Too late," indeed…

I try to help him when the lift reaches the underground garage, but he dodges to the side. "I'll walk by myself."

The doors open, but Salinger doesn't start walking right away. He leans heavily against the wall before he straightens his back and steps out of the lift, his steps quite steady.

Salinger stops dead in his tracks after a few steps into the underground garage. When I turn around and ask what happened, he frowns, shaking his head, and says it is nothing. Just as he is about to reach the parking space, there is a sudden *bam*, followed by the alarms of all the cars nearby. Unexpectedly, a girl rushes out of nowhere and bumps into Salinger. Salinger instinctively helps the girl up and surprisingly manages to keep himself steady.

The girl is a mess. The passenger door of the dark blue BYD SUV behind her is open, and is scraping the car next to it. A man in the BYD is straightening his clothes. The girl glances up and is a little startled to see Salinger, who looks through the windscreen at the middle-aged man in the car. He frowns as his eyes fall on the man's hands, which are tucking his shirt into the waist of his pants.

The middle-aged man gets out of the car and says to Salinger, "Sorry about that. Did we startle you guys?" He waves to the girl and says, "What are you doing? Get in, I'll give you a ride."

He steps forward, trying to take the girl with him, but she keeps ducking behind Salinger. The middle-aged man reaches out to pull her by force, looking displeased. This time, Salinger reacts almost instinctively and raises his hand to hold the girl back a little. The move is simple but firm. The man smiles.

"Let's not misunderstand each other. She knows me. Ask her if you don't believe me."

The girl doesn't deny it, but she ducks behind Salinger as soon as the man approaches—if Salinger were to move aside at this point, she would definitely feel desperate. But I know that since Salinger held out his hand for her once, he won't move over now.

Salinger turns back to the girl and asks, "Do you know me?"

The girl opens her mouth for the first time, her voice trembling as she nods repeatedly. "I do! I know you!"

Her eyes are filled with the words "help me." Salinger nods and says to the middle-aged man, "Since she knows me too, I'll take her back."

He reaches backwards and takes the girl's hand. Despite the sweet smell of alcohol still on him, the sobriety and decisiveness she finds in Salinger's hand when she holds it makes her decide to go with him without hesitation.

I feel glad it turns out the way it does. But if I had known what would happen later, maybe I should have been ruthless that day and stopped Salinger from offering the girl a hand.

There could have been a hundred ways to help her, but it shouldn't have been like this.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

We don't get far before Salinger lets go of the girl's hand and asks, "Where do you live?"

I am a bit surprised when the girl gives the name of the place, because it's where I used to live—a neighborhood mostly filled with outsiders who drifted into the city to study, pursue their dream, and work. Because the rent is low, the security isn't too good. Salinger asks me if it's on our way, And I say yes. He nods and says to drop her off, then gets into the passenger seat.

The girl just stands there. For whatever reason, she doesn't pull the door open herself, so I open it for her. If she wants to get in, then naturally we would have to get her home safely. If she doesn't, we could always call her a cab. Saying too much doesn't seem appropriate at this time and place.

I pull the door open and wait for a moment before the girl finally bows her head, saying thank you, and gets in. I close the door and turn to see Salinger's elbow resting on the passenger window, watching us without a word in the back mirror.

No one speaks in the car. Before long, we stop at a traffic light and the girl's phone suddenly rings. She looks down at it hastily, and for a moment her expression is so helpless that she is on the verge of tears as she fumbles to turn it off. We remain silent for a while longer, but we can hear the girl's growing attempt to hold back her sobbing.

"Should we call the police?" Salinger suddenly asks.

He is still drunk, but at this moment his voice is very sober and calm. The girl bursts into tears instantly, shaking her head and says she could not go to the police —that man is a senior executive at Sky Entertainment.

I am a bit surprised to hear the name Sky Entertainment; It's a name I've heard a lot in the last couple of years. It started off making web entertainment shows and web dramas, and they've produced a lot of big hit shows and popular franchised dramas. Now it seems to have started working with some TV stations as well.

I glance at the girl through the rear-view mirror as I wait for the red light, and notice she looks familiar.

"Do I recognize you from somewhere?"

As soon as I ask without thinking, Salinger turns his head to look at me with a frown. I am a bit confused. *Is this bad timing?*

The girl says she is on a dance talent show on CBC TV. Only then do I remember that the dance talent show is *Dance the Night Away.*

"No wonder. I do follow that show, are you...Dong Jia? Loved the black swan dance you did."

I try hard to control my tone and choose my wording carefully. I look back at her when I finish, hoping that the conversation would distract her at least a little, only to

hear Salinger say, “Green light.”

I quickly turn my head and start the car, staring straight down the road, not daring to get distracted again.

Dong Jia’s place is less than 200 meters away from where I used to live. The road is still in a bad condition; several streetlights are broken. One or two tired people can occasionally be seen walking along the side of the road, which is full of parked motorbikes and piles of debris. You have to keep your headlights on, otherwise you can’t see anyone on the road at all. Small shops are scattered along the roadside. Some people look curiously at us, and a few kids rush down the stone path. *Bang.* The sudden sound of something hitting the car makes me stop immediately.

A kid with a toy gun turns around and runs into a shop. I get out of the car to check, and see that the bullet has scraped a thumb-sized mark on the bottom half of the door. The mini-mart owner, who looks like the boy’s father, hurries out and apologizes profusely, before asking how much it will cost.

It is not up to me to say, so I look to Salinger in the car. He glances at the little boy hiding behind the door of the shop and says, “Never mind. It was a pretty good shot. Tell him to repay me by giving me his gun.”

The boy’s father looks stunned at the request. Even Dong Jia in the back seat looks a bit curious. Still, the father quickly confiscates the plastic gun that has been causing trouble everywhere. I pass it to Salinger, who opens the chamber expertly.

“The bullets?”

The boy ends up having to hand over his whole pack of paintballs. Salinger glances at the boy, whose mouth is downturned; he’s being lectured by his dad. Salinger puts the plastic gun on the driver’s side and tells me to drive.

Dong Jia is much calmer by the time she gets out of the car and thanks us profusely. She says her thank-you to me, because Salinger is resting against the back of his seat with his eyes closed. She steals a glance at him, not daring to disturb him.

As I watch Dong Jia enter the building and see the lights turn on inside, I start the car with relief. As the car moves along the small road made of stone slates, the drive gets a little bumpy. That is probably why Salinger opens his eyes, looks out the window and says, “You know this area well.”

“Yeah, a little further over is where I used to live.”

Salinger sits up a little bit and tells me to show him. I am a bit flattered by this request, and agree. The car lurches for a while before I remember that the road is too narrow, and that I would have to reverse to get to where I lived—but there is no way to reverse on these shitty roads.

“We might have to take a big detour.”

“Well,” he says, “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

I then drive the Maserati carefully out of the narrow, twisting lane, turn around to rejoin the overpass, and drive back.

As we go up a 45-degree slope, I point out to him. “It’s up there.”

Salinger looks up that uphill slope. “I can’t see anything from here.”

“So are we going to drive up there? The road isn’t very good,” I say.

“How bad can it be? Will there be more brats shooting bullets at me?” When you get drunk, the drunkenness probably doesn’t dissipate that easily. Perhaps that’s why he ends up muttering, “Then I’ll confiscate them all.”

There is a childish earnestness in that tone. It has a ruthlessness that makes Alan call him an unruly devil. I want to laugh at that, but fight to hold it back.

The car drives uphill. We become surrounded by familiar sights that make me a little nostalgic—a small supermarket where I bought instant noodles and found shelter from the rain, a repair shop where I repaired computers and stereo equipment. The shop owner’s bicycle is still parked outside the shop. A small hot pot restaurant where I would come to treat myself in winter.

I pull over to the side of the road, look at the small, walled-up four-story residential building across the street, and say, “Lin Sai-*ge*, this is it.”

It is an old-fashioned detached townhouse with a private entrance. It’s always crowded with about thirty tenants; mostly university students and graduates who come to pursue their dreams in this big city.

Salinger looks up with some curiosity at the lit balconies and asks me, “Which floor did you live on?

I chuckle. “You can’t see it. I lived in the basement.”

Salinger doesn’t say anything for a while. I suddenly regret saying that. I should have just let him think I was living in an apartment with a balcony, where I could see the sun rise and set every day. I don’t want him to feel sorry for me, so I am just about to say that living in a basement had its advantages—that it was quiet for making music, not too noisy—when Salinger suddenly speaks up.

“It’s incredible that you could write those songs in a place like this.”

He doesn’t lose his composure saying that, but the compliment is so blunt. He probably doesn’t notice it himself, but my ears burn as I bow to start the car.

“People like me are a dime a dozen.”

Salinger looks at me. “Is that so?”

Perhaps because he is drunk, I feel that Salinger seems different today—as if he is on the border between chaos and sobriety, between indulgence and restraint.

On the way back, Salinger asks me, “Is she a good dancer?”

That is an abrupt question. It takes me a moment before I know what he is asking. I don’t actually know anything about dancing, but Dong Jia’s Black Swan, which I accidentally saw when I was changing channels, was beautiful.

“You don’t even know anything about dancing, so how do you know it’s beautiful?” Salinger says.

I am a bit embarrassed. I *don’t* know anything about dance. “Maybe because...all arts are alike.”

But even with good dancing, will she still make it to the finals if she pissed off the top people? What should she do after this? Should she have used that opportunity for guaranteed future success? Surely a girl who can dance that

amazingly well would not want to do so.

The car is stuck on the viaduct, not moving. All that is in the car is static and flickering lights. Salinger lowers the window, saying nothing other than, “It’s hot.”

The cold wind pours in and ruffles the hair on his forehead. He says he is hot, yet contradictorily he pulls his blue-gray turtleneck sweater up over his chin in the cold wind. He nods in silence. He is always reticent, and now he looks even more so.

“Mind if I have a cigarette?”

I hasten to nod. Who am I to say no to him? He lights the cigarette and holds it out the window, the flickering tail lights ahead of him shining in his eyes. The red light swims in the corner of his eyes every time the car moves one step forward.

I remember that talk show I watched so long ago, and thought to myself how good Tang Dan is at reading people. This man just came with a natural aura of melancholy. No one fits the word better than him.

“How have your ears been these days?” Salinger asks.

I can’t say whether it is good or bad. I just concentrate on my work and don’t think about it, but it is a fact that the hearing in my left ear is deteriorating. At first, it is hard to get used to it. There is always a feeling that something is blocking my ear; I could even feel the unbalanced pressure on both sides when I slept. But as time goes on, I get used to it. At least for now, the right ear is healthy—the doctor said that the right ear is not affected.

“Same as before.”

“Is it?” Salinger says. “I noticed at the last recording that you almost tripped on the stairs.”

I am a little surprised. The studio is underground, so I had to walk down a narrow underground staircase with high, steep steps, plus there was no light. But I only stumbled a little. I don’t know why I stumbled, but I do occasionally feel like I am walking on thin air when I go down the stairs—like I can’t tell the distance between the steps and my feet. It only happens when I am going down stairs, so now I always keep my eyes on my feet when I do. But I was alone that day, so I wonder how he saw it. I am curious, but it seems inappropriate to ask.

Salinger looks back from outside. “I’ve heard that people with ear problems sometimes have trouble keeping their balance.”

“Oh I see.” I nod. It is something I didn’t know until today, but I guess it is true.

In the quiet car, it becomes more and more apparent that Salinger’s voice is low, not as clear as it should be for a young man his age. My curiosity takes over, and I can’t resist asking, “Lin Sai-*ge*, mind if I ask a question?”

“Shoot.”

I ask carefully, “I heard from Wendy that you used to be the lead singer of another band. Is that true?”

Salinger freezes. It isn’t conspicuous. His relaxed eyelashes still for a second, then nods without a care. “It’s true.”

“So how did your voice...end up like this?”

Wendy-*jie* didn't say much about this, only that it was by accident, but the question lingers in my mind. I wonder what he would have sounded like, and what accident had changed him. But is it appropriate to ask? Would he answer?

Salinger is silent for a while. Since when does his silence not upset me anymore? Maybe I am too used to it; so used to it that it feels as natural as breathing for him not to speak. Like accompanying a silent animal, as Stone would say.

"I was leaving after a live show when someone handed me a glass of water," Salinger says. "I drank it, and then my throat became like this."

He says it lightly. I am horrified. I turn my head to him.

"Did that person do it on purpose? Why?"

"I don't know. Hated me, I guess."

I can't restrain my anger. He thought it was from a fan! That's why he drank it without even thinking about it. How did it turn out like this?

"Let's go."

I snap back to my senses and start the car with an, "Oh".

The crashed cars ahead are towed away. The white Maserati races through the night on the overpass. I am in shock the whole time.

When I get back, I can't sleep at all; too many feelings are clogging up my chest. Whether it is Dong Jia, who was sexually harassed by a senior executive, or Salinger, who lost his voice after drinking water handed to him by a "fan" and had since bid farewell to his career as a lead singer—both have me tossing and turning, helpless and grateful for what happened to Dong Jia, but only angry and heartbroken for Salinger.

Thank goodness he met LOTUS in the end. LOTUS is his salvation.

With this thought, I feel slightly calmer. I turn on my phone and play my music, placing it on my pillow and looking up at the shadow on the ceiling. I can't forget the look on Salinger's face when he told me the truth. He looked calm as a shadow. He was the same way when faced with the broken bass. He took it much more calmly than anyone else would. Still, I can't forget it, because I know he isn't indifferent. He is just too strong—so strong that he can take many, many blows, any one of which could easily take another man down, so fate has to find another way to take him down.

TRACK 16

I go to Salinger's house today and only get a message from him when I am already downstairs.

Salinger's note says: *Off to the racetracks*.

In fact, he told me yesterday that he would stay home to do a remix today, and that Ms. Zhang has taken the day off so I should bring over some food. He must have felt the racing spirit inside him stir when he opened his eyes early in the morning or heard a racing motorbike whizzing by downstairs. That is the only way I can interpret it. I can't help it; my idol has to have this kind of free-spirited, uninhibited persona.

I put everything in the freezer, then go downstairs. As I stand in the lift, I suddenly recall what he said last time. As if enchanted, I press "P1."

The parking space for the Ducati is empty. Of course it is empty; what else would it be? I laugh at myself for being so paranoid and wonder if I should stop suspecting my idol like that. But as I turn to leave, I catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye and my heart skips a beat. *No way!*

I go backwards, and for a moment am truly dumbfounded—there is a yellow sticky note on the window of the white SUV with big words on it. *Well Done.*

I stare at the note and the flourishing handwriting on it. For a second, I want to pretend I haven't been here, that I haven't seen it, but after seeing the phrase *"Well done"* in Salinger's handwriting, I end up taking it with me. I wonder what Salinger's face will look like when he comes back on his Ducati, takes off his helmet, and sees the missing note. I wonder whether he will laugh and think this fanboy has really learnt his lesson, or seriously wonder if this fanboy is finally starting to be suspicious of his idol.

Whatever Salinger thinks when he sees the note is missing, I have to let him know that I actually take his words seriously. So in the future, he should think twice before saying stuff like this to his fanboy.

Nothing happens for the rest of the day. I don't get a call or a text from Salinger in the evening or anything. I am a bit disappointed, but the note is just the beginning. Early in the morning, I am still wrapped under the covers when I receive a message from Salinger with nothing more than the mobile number of his fitness instructor.

I jump up in my bed. All the sleepiness has left my head.

If I say I'm at the gym, you can call my fitness instructor. Just say there's an emergency. You'll know immediately if I'm really working out.

Is he asking me to call the fitness instructor right now?

When I go downstairs to the Japanese restaurant for lunch, the owner asks me, "What's with the scowl?"

I say I have something I don't know whether I should do or not.

"That's the way you Chinese are. Why complicate things? Follow your heart!" The owner knocks on his chest and tells me, "If you want to do it, do it!"

Do I want to do it? I ask myself as I slurp my noodles. I do want to. I don't really care if he lies or not, but when he sends me the instructor's number, I want to take advantage of the opportunity to dial and seize this small privilege he has given me... Could it be that this is the kind of excitement and mixed emotions a subordinate feels when he is suddenly given power by his boss?

"Your chicken soup[21] just keeps getting better and better."

I bury my head in the noodle soup, pay for it and hurry out. I hear the owner's confused voice behind me as I walk out the door.

"Chicken soup? It's not chicken noodle soup, kid!"

I walk out of the Japanese restaurant, thinking that Salinger should be on break right about now, it is close to noon. I might give up again if I hesitate any longer, so I dial directly, but I accidentally dial Salinger's number by mistake, so I hang up quickly. I shake my head as I am about to dial the fitness instructor's number, but to my surprise, Salinger calls back.

I have to work up the courage to answer the phone. "Lin Sai-*ge*."

"What's up?"

His breathing is a little heavy. The background noise behind him sounds right for the gym.

I tell him, "Nothing, I just..."

"Dialed the wrong number?"

"Eh...yeah, that's right!"

Salinger chuckles. "Well, you dial the right one then."

With that, he hangs up. But he is obviously working out. Is there any reason to bother the fitness instructor?

The owner walks out with the trash. "I thought you left. Why are you still crouching around the corner?"

I look down at my phone. "My boss. Sometimes I really don't understand what he's thinking..."

"He wouldn't be your boss if you knew what he was thinking," the owner says. "A boss has to be unpredictable. He has to manipulate you like a fool."

I look at the restaurant owner, who is humming *"Giant Wave"* by LOTUS as he walks down the alley to take the trash out. I can't believe he is a fan of my boss, too. I smile and think, *If memory serves me right, he's going to have his 50th birthday soon. Why don't I get him an autographed CD, then? An uncle with a rock and roll soul at this age should be cherished.*

The fitness instructor finally picks up the phone. I stand up.

"Hello, this is Salinger's assistant. Is he working out now, may I ask? I just have something urgent I need to ask him!" I finish in one breath as I press my face and let out a long breath.

"Oh, he's there—"

"Okay, thanks. Then I'll..."

I am going to say *"I will pick him up straight away later, so you don't need to bother him,"* then my checking-in would have been done. However, I didn't expect the instructor to say, "Just hold on. I'll put him on the phone."

"Ah, no need!"

I literally want to lurch and hold down the instructor's hand!

The restaurant owner comes back humming, hands empty this time. He looks at me from top to bottom.

"I find that you are very much like the shiba inu dog my neighbor keeps—a peaceful dog, every day surprised by its owner...but your boss keeps teasing you like this every day and you still treat him like your first love. You must really love him a lot..."

The sound of fitness instruments comes from the phone. After a moment, it is replaced by Salinger's voice. "I thought you wouldn't call."

"I'm not bothering you, am I? I was going to tell your instructor that I'll come straight to pick you up later, but I didn't expect him to put you on the phone."

"You're coming to pick me up?" Salinger says. "It just so happens that I'm about done with training, I'm going to take a shower upstairs later. Can you be here at two?"

I am at a loss. Saying that I'd pick him up is just an excuse; he'd driven himself there, so he shouldn't need me to pick him up.

"Can't come? Never mind if you can't come," Salinger says.

"No problem!" I hasten to add. "Two o'clock is fine!"

"I'll see you at two, then." Salinger chuckles as he hangs up.

See you at two. I look at the time. Even though I have to change three metros to get there now, and the whole thing is a series of mistakes, I am still surprisingly motivated.

Standing in the overcrowded carriage, I remember the first time I went to the airport to meet LOTUS in high school with the same excitement.

As I was leaving, the owner said, "Your boss is making you work overtime again. Does he have any humanity?"

Every time he says something about Salinger, I have the urge to tell him that my boss is the bassist of LOTUS to see how he would react. I guess he would immediately change his mind. *"Why are you dawdling when Salinger is asking you to go, boy?"* Maybe he'd have thrown me out before I could even finish my noodles.

He would understand me then, wouldn't he? I am going to meet Salinger like this; to meet the bassist of LOTUS! Who wouldn't want to see their idol every day, especially on a day like this—an inspiration-depleted, mediocre day, when the thought of meeting him soon makes the gears of inspiration in my head spin like a V8 engine?

I've finally figured out how I am going to arrange that song "*The 26-Year-Old Boy in the Baseball Cap*". The whole tone of the song will still be based on acoustic guitar and acoustic bass, but I am going to use a plugged-in band to back that bridge section that Salinger wrote. It is going to make the song sound very special, especially the bridge part. It is going to hit every music fan right in the heart like a sniper bullet.

There are so many faces in the carriage. There must have been a lot of people like me, who are asked to work overtime, asked to attend tutor classes, asked to do this and that. Everywhere I look, I see tired bodies and dull expressions. And I am being asked to do something I am more than 10,000 times willing to do. Standing in a crowded carriage, all I feel is brightness and happiness.

The fitness gym is premium members-only. I send a text to Salinger from downstairs announcing my arrival. After a while, Salinger gets back to me. *Come up and grab the car keys. Drive the car out and wait for me.*

Salinger isn't in the gym, but upstairs in the hotel suite. I knock on the door before my phone rings. Salinger asks over the sound of rushing water on the other end of the phone, "Chi Nan?"

"Yeah, that's me."

About ten seconds later, the door opens automatically.

The moment I enter, I hear the sound of water in the shower. I notice the bathroom is right next to the entrance. The light inside is on. The steam is heavy on the foggy glass. A blurred shadow behind the door blocks the light behind the steam. Salinger's voice, mixed with the sound of water, comes from behind the door.

"The car keys are on the table. Wait for me downstairs."

"Alright!" I answer, then hurriedly grab the keys and leave.

When I pass the bathroom door, I can sense the hazy figure behind it leaving its spot and going back under the shower. The sound of water changes from an even spray to a fluctuating stream falling to the ground. I don't know why the sound makes my cheeks flush—including the wet, dripping sound mixed with the sound of spraying water when he asks me to get the keys. In all the time I've been his assistant, I've never run into him in the shower. And although we're both men, idols are still different after all. Idol...should be considered the third gender. That's why it is a little uncomfortable, I guess.

I take the Maserati out and park it downstairs for twenty minutes or so, before Salinger comes out wearing a black biker jacket and sunglasses and shouldering a duffel bag. I can smell the shower gel and shampoo as he pulls open the door and gets in. His freshly-washed hair isn't thoroughly blow-dried, and it glistens with water.

"Go straight back?" I ask.

Salinger buckles up. "Let's go somewhere."

I nod. "Where?"

“You drive first.”

He won’t say where to go, so I can’t just step on it. It is a bit torturous, but I also feel a bit curious. I just listen as Salinger tells me to turn left, go up the bridge, turn right… I look at the road signs, the whole time guessing where he wants to go.

When “University Road” pops up on the road sign, I think I know where we are headed. Further ahead is the CTR Music Academy. I can feel the festive atmosphere even before I reach the main entrance. There are banners hanging outside the campus. The cars moving in and out are even creating a traffic jam.

It is CTR Conservatory’s anniversary celebration. I suddenly become excited myself.

Salinger says, “I heard from Stone that it is the conservatory’s celebration and there would be a performance, so I thought I’d come and see it.”

“Is Stone coming?” I ask.

Salinger says, “I think so. He’s a CTR graduate.”

“Does he know you’re coming?”

Salinger turns his head to look at me with a smile and doesn’t say anything.

I turn my eyes back on the road, trying as hard as I can to conceal what I feel. I grip the steering wheel and stare down the road, wondering what it is that keeps me from looking and asking any more questions. Maybe it is the glistening softness of his freshly washed hair. It makes even that smile seem like it has been bathing in sunlight.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

The car struggles to get into the campus. There are too many people and cars coming and going, so we park nearby while Salinger puts on his sunglasses and gets out. His freshly washed hair looks natural, so he is not easily recognizable.

Today he is not Salinger, the band’s bassist, but just a regular handsome guy, Lin Sai.

CTR is jam-packed with people, the buzz of activity comparable to a carnival, the sound of music and musical instruments everywhere. The Conservatory’s anniversary brings many alumni celebrities back to their alma mater, so there is a lot of press, most of whom flock to chase the celebrities. But this is not the scene Salinger cares for.

There are small makeshift stages everywhere on campus. Any open space can be used as a stage. If you just set up a drum kit on the side of the road, or grabbed an accordion or a saxophone, you could play to your heart’s desire. Aside from the press, all those who come here today are Ziqi looking for their Boya[22].

There is a stunning electric violin quartet that blends rock elements into classical music. The performance is as addictive as a rollercoaster. There is an acapella group, immature but still charmingly harmonious. Their lively vocals are like a pirate ship, swinging skywards and back to your ears. There is a boy who is playing classical guitar by the bench somewhere on the walkway, clutching his guitar and

playing the song “Memories of the Alhambra.” Although it is a very traditional piece, he has amazingly good finger work. If electric violins are roller coasters and acapellas were pirate ships, this classical guitar would be a carousel, a classic that all amusement parks would have. It wouldn’t be perfect without it.

Of course, there are many bad ones, too. Newbies in strange costumes performing so-called musicals that are a mess, from the music to the show. Salinger frowns and grimaces, he drops a “spooky house” before walking away.

At its most crowded, we are pushed up against other people. Salinger always seems to find a shortcut through the sea of people, but I often struggle to keep up as if the crowd could automatically split up in front of him and block the path again as soon as it reaches me.

“Lin Sai-*ge*!” I shout, getting immediately pushed aside by the crowd of people chasing some big celebrity.

By the time the crowd rumbles past me like migrating wildebeests, there is nothing in front of me but a scattering of leaflets and no sign of Salinger. I walk to a slightly quieter place to call him. I hope is that his phone is on vibrate mode. After a while, it finally gets picked up.

“Hey, Lin Sai-*ge*! Where are you now? I’m coming for you!” I cover one ear. “There are just too many people over here!”

“Where am I?” Salinger seems to be looking around on his end of the phone. “Can you see a very tall sequoia where you are?”

I turn my head and spot it, sighing with relief. I thought I’d find him by looking for the sequoias, but then I walk over and realize something horrible. There’s a row of them!

I look up at the sequoias with a deep sense of powerlessness and suddenly remember something. When Salinger was talking to me, there seemed to be strings in the background. Not violins, but cellos. It is some unaccompanied cello suite by Bach.

Music crisscrosses my ears. I am glad I can still hear. The sensitivity to bass I’ve developed over the years has enabled me to pick out the hidden cello line from the myriad of instruments. Following the sound of the cello, I finally come upon a tall tree...

Standing under that big golden tree, I sigh in disbelief. *It’s a ginkgo, Salinger!*

The cellist on stage rises to take his curtain call. I’m looking for Salinger in the dispersing crowd when my sweatshirt’s hood gets pulled over my head.

“Got you.”

Salinger walks up next to me at some point during that cheerful phrase. He seems to be in a good mood. I can catch his smiling eyes even though he is wearing sunglasses. I think to myself, *It’s me who got* you*, Salinger*. I look back at the ginkgo. I decide to keep this long story to myself and not tell anyone.

The pop music students have set up a very cool stage not far from the piano room, where a band is already on stage. After tuning the mic, the male vocalist says, “Don’t leave if you’re already here, or you’ll definitely regret it. We have a very famous *shixiong*[23] from our department coming to support us today. This song is

dedicated to the special guest—my very first rock enlightenment and my idol!"

The students below seem to have guessed who has come and get excited. As soon as the first few guitar notes come out, everyone recognizes it as LOTUS's "*Freedom."* When the bouncing bass line joins in with fast drumbeats, the audience explodes in the shockwave. In the blink of an eye, people crowd around the stage. Salinger and I were originally standing on the edge of the crowd, but now we turn around and there is already a huge crowd behind us.

Although Stone composed "*Freedom,"* Salinger arranged it. It is one of his early works, so it is a very powerful and colorful piece. When the musicians on stage are in full act, the corner they occupy is undeniably the most eye-catching stage at the anniversary celebration.

An unexpected guitarist suddenly joins the stage during the guitar solo. Before I can get a good look at him, my ears are covered by Salinger. We are immediately drowned in a tsunami of screaming. There on stage is Stone, wearing a commemorative CTR T-shirt and clutching his iconic red guitar.

Salinger lets go of his hands when the noise of the crowd fades a little. I wanted to thank him for saving my ears, but instead I see him looking intently at the stage, his hands casually tucking into his jacket pockets, as if it is just a courtesy that he doesn't need any thanks for.

Such an idol he is. How can I put it—warm enough, handsome enough, but also a little heartless, I think with a smile.

At the end of the song, Stone greets everyone. It feels a bit strange to watch Stone from the audience; Salinger and I are standing right in the crowd, and he doesn't even know it. Stone interacts with the students for about ten minutes. The audience scrambles to ask him if he was ever in a relationship when he was at CTR.

Stone says, "The only relationship I had was with rock, nothing else. Honestly, you guys gotta stop thinking that all of us in the band are influenced by Salinger, okay?"

I laugh along with the students next to me for a while before I hear Salinger say, "What's so funny?" I stop laughing instantly.

The lead singer asks, "Well then, how did you write those love songs?"

Stone says, "I've only been in one relationship. That was back when I was in middle school, just for one semester, and she dumped me because my grades were too bad..."

Everyone is laughing. I don't find what he says too surprising. When Stone and Salinger stand next to each other, they give off the very distinct vibes of an A student and a slacker respectively.

Stone says, "Whenever we write about falling in love, we have to gather the whole team together to brainstorm ideas and scrape together lyrics."

"That's just sad," the lead singer pities, adding, "But wait, Salinger can write it!"

Stone rolls his eyes. "Bullshit. He can write *Giant Wave, Rooftop* and *1729* in one night, but make him write a love story and he'll fall asleep!"

"Seriously?"

“Seriously. I gave him a pen and paper once and locked him in the studio to write. I thought to myself, *Well, aren’t you the expert in dating? You have to give me something after all these romances.* I go to check the results after a few hours and there he is, curled up on the couch, asleep, with a song title ‘*I’m Fucking Loving You’* written on the music sheet.”

The audience is going crazy with laughter, while Salinger nods with a very subtle sigh.

The lead singer asks, “Was ‘Wish It Is Love’ also scrambled together like that?”

“No, it is a solo piece by your Salinger-*oppa.* The lyrics are endorsed by your Ji Shi-*oppa*, so you can say it is incredible, a masterpiece for our band of single dogs. Is it good?”

The students shout in unison, “So good!” Their voices are soft and gentle. They must have been thinking of the song, and really think it sounds great.

“That’s great. Our Cosmic Band is now a rock band with a good love song, too,” says Stone. “I’ll leave the love songs to your Salinger-*oppa* from now on. I’ll go back and pass your kind words to him! Right, let’s record a video to send to him. I’ll think of something to say... Everyone shout ‘Salinger, we’re fucking loving you,’ alright?”

No one can say no. Stone has all sorts of ideas for shenanigans when he is with the fans. The band members all come over too, squatting in the first row as Stone adjusts the camera angle front and back.

“Okay, everyone is in the frame. Look at the camera, everyone. We’ll shout together on the count of three. One, two, three!”

Everyone raises their hands in a metal salute toward the camera and shouts at Stone’s signal.

“Salingerrrr, we’re fucking loving yooooooou!”

The fans wouldn’t have used the word “fucking” to Salinger if it wasn’t for Stone. The shout is particularly cheerful and unrestrained. Salinger also raises his middle finger in the direction of the camera, which Stone sees immediately and almost loses his grip on his phone. Seeing Stone’s reaction, Salinger takes back his middle finger and makes a heart, returning his “fucking loving.” I don’t know if Stone captured the heart or not. It would be a shame if he didn’t. For Salinger to do this, it is...is it inappropriate to say it’s cute?

After the video is recorded, Stone picks up the microphone and coughs. “With all the ranting I just did, I have to be fair and say that Salinger is a good guy...”

“I don’t need you to hand me a nice guy card,” Salinger whispers.

“You guys are music majors. I don’t need to tell you how good he is at arranging music, or how good he is at bass if you’ve ever heard him live, or how handsome he is, which I don’t get anyway, so I will leave that to your girls...” After saying a bunch of nice stuff, he drops a bombshell at the end. “Do you want to meet him?”

There is a loud gasp, which is replaced by people screaming at the top of their lungs. “Yeeeeeeeeees.”

Stone says, “I’ll call him and ask if he wants to join us.” Then, he dials his phone.

The area offstage, which was so explosive before, is now silent as everyone holds their breath listening to the long beeps of the phone, expecting to hear Salinger's voice in the next second.

The moment the phone vibrates, I can't hear the ring, but I feel the light trembling buzz from being pressed against Salinger's shoulder. I imagine how great it must feel the second Salinger picks up the phone and the crowd turns back toward him in surprise. People would part for him like the sea for Moses, allowing him to walk onto the stage and take the crown that is rightfully his.

Stone looks at him from the stage. However, Salinger doesn't answer the phone. His hands are still in his coat pockets, his right hand quietly pressing the vibrating phone in his pocket to stop it from making too much noise. He shakes his head gently at Stone on the stage, but Stone doesn't give up and shouts into the beeping phone.

"Come on! Pick up the phone, Animal Boy!"

The phone is still buzzing at Salinger's side. He just grips it with ease until the call cuts itself off. There are sighs of disappointment, like a hot air balloon deflating.

Stone shakes his head and says, "Maybe he's fallen in love again."

Everyone bursts into laughter. Salinger smiles, too, lowering his head and hiding that smile behind his sunglasses.

The band plays "*Wish It Is Love*" next. Without Salinger's bass, Stone's guitar alone can't fully hold up the song, but it is still very touching, as good as any love song I've ever heard. Plus, it really seems to touch the listener's heart.

I am a little bummed Salinger didn't get up on that stage, that I didn't get to hear him play bass and see the crowd go crazy for him, but if he had gotten up there, I wouldn't have been able to listen to the songs with him as relaxed and comfortable as I am now, I guess.

The sunset reflecting on his sunglasses is golden, as if it is lit up by the final enthusiastic chorus.

TRACK 17

THE visit to CTR inspires me to finalize the arrangement of "*The 26-Year-Old Boy in A Baseball Cap"*. I am only using acoustic guitar throughout, except for a few electric instruments in Salinger's part as I have envisioned previously. The copyright and attribution issues that I have been struggling with for the Salinger-written part are also resolved.

On our way back from CTR that day, I asked him in an indirect way how much it would cost to hire him to compose a song.

Salinger answered, "I only take royalty cuts."

"What if it's non-commercial?"

He looked at me and said, "Then of course it'd be free."

I drove the car, feeling all chirpy. *That is good to know.* I added, "Lin Sai-*ge*, did you ever use another stage name before you debuted?"

Salinger said, "I had a very dumb name back in high school when I was in a band."

"What name?"

"…Do you have to know?"

Right. He'd already said it was dumb. I don't want anyone to know I used to call myself "Hayato" either.

"No, I'm just asking."

There was another moment of silence in the car, and I thought to myself, *I might have to think of something else.*

"Bahamut."

He said it out of the blue. A fork in the road appeared ahead all of a sudden, and my hands on the steering wheel were a bit overwhelmed.

I steered the car in a hurry and said, "It's the name of a dragon! That's a perfect name for you! All dragons in western mythology are evil, right? But Bahamut is the king of good dragons, despite being super powerful. That's a cool name! Not dumb at all..."

"If I said I called myself Jack the Ripper, you'd probably still find a bunch of excuses to compliment me, right?"

That was a very restrained jibe; he didn't try to embarrass me. I tried to recall my tone and felt like an ass-kissing junior who did a bad job of flattering the gangster senior—earning his contempt instead, and now desperately backpedaling.

"Uh, because I like Bahamut too. I even thought about getting a German Shepherd in the future and calling him Baham..."

Shit, I didn't think I'd be so dumb. Speechless! I turned the atmosphere in the carriage so awkward.

I blushed and kept my mouth shut to concentrate on driving. When I took a furtive glance at Salinger, he seemed to be in a good mood; his arm resting on the window, a light curve on his mouth.

I wanted this song to be a surprise for him when it is done, so I hadn't planned on asking him directly. Thankfully, he didn't ask why I was asking either. It was just that it had been so long since he said he wanted to use the song as a ringtone, I didn't know if he still remembered it. I wondered if the surprise would still work.

I am starting to look forward to things I shouldn't be looking forward to. I don't know whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. But I am holding such anticipation because he is Salinger, right? Salinger is not someone who just says things. Even when he said to Ren Meilun that he would see her drama, he unilaterally kept his promise even after the breakup. What would he do if it was me? The words written on my notepad—would he remember and keep them as well?

No! Just the thought of him using my song as his ringtone made me lose my calm. I've been keeping my expectations so high. What if, in contrast, he didn't even remember it, or didn't think it was good enough to be his ringtone?

When I get home, I check LOTUS's schedule. They have a talk show in a week. I will use the break to contact the studio I used to go to. The owner, Ray, is two years older than me. He sold everything to create the studio after his band split up when they graduated college.

I ask him how he is doing, and he says, "The same as always, you know. Running a studio, you truly get to witness the cruelty of this business. So many faces never come back after a few times. I hope they are moving up. Maybe my small studio isn't good enough for them anymore, but often they just disappear. I'm really surprised that you're still coming to help my business." The man pats me on the shoulder. "My friend, I'll be glad when you don't have to come to my studio anymore."

I open my bag to take out my electric guitar as I smile and say, "Okay, I'll try to move up."

Naturally, that day won't come, not unless a miracle were to happen, but I am fine the way I am. I am not the center of my dreams, but I am still standing right next to him.

Since we aren't going to go commercial, we don't expect a particularly high standard of recording and enjoy the process a lot. We only do two takes for the acoustic guitar before it is done. Only Salinger's bridge is taking a bit more effort. Although the electric guitar and bass passages are few, I don't want to settle for anything less, so I play them all myself, only using a synthesizer for the drum part.

"Beautiful!" Ray crosses his arms behind his head, sighing sentimentally. "Reminds me of when I used to play in a band. It was really good back then, rock was great..." He ducks his head and wipes at his eyes. "Geez I didn't actually want to say your song made me wanna cry. It's all your fault!"

I laugh and tap on the glass, thinking he is joking. When the man looks up, his eyes are actually red. I am a bit taken aback by such a grown man suddenly tearing up. I have really mixed feelings. Maybe the song was written right, but also a bit sad for all the people who can't let go once they've started something.

As I walk out of the studio, Ray asks me, "Are your ears okay? You are rubbing them the whole time while recording."

I say it's been a while since I've recorded with headphones on.

"Who's this Bahamut guy?" Ray asks curiously. "Did he write the bridge?"

"Yeah, he's my idol."

"Isn't your idol Salinger?"

"Yeah." I put my instrument bag on my back. "I've got things to do this afternoon, so bye!"

Ray walks me to the door when he suddenly stops me. "Chi Nan, will you keep coming here to record?"

I turn around, wanting to make a joke about him trying to shoo me away, but then I see him standing in front of the narrow door, looking all serious.

"I will," I say. "As long as you are still open here."

If I stop coming one day, it doesn't mean I've given up; just that I could not come anymore.

"Good," he says. "I really don't want to record all those rubbish commercial jingles and jibber jabber all day long. I've never told you, but I love listening to you sing. You're like a different person when you sing. So handsome, it's like you're glowing. Such great energy! If only we had met earlier, I could have been your drummer as well!"

I step forward, patting him on the shoulder, sharing a one-arm hug with him. I am not even that good. What's "super handsome, glowing, or energetic" is the rock'n'roll look we all have in our hearts. I have that filter in his eyes. I wish it could stay on forever.

Saying he'd come play drums for me sounds like a confession. It is a bit late for that, but still, better late than never. Our meeting might have come a bit late, but it is still heartwarming.

I go home and mix the song myself, and upload it two days later, heart full of anxiety and anticipation. I put "Bahamut" under composition and lyrics. I don't put Salinger's name on it, but I am sure he'd understand. I don't want to exploit his name for publicity, nor do I want the label and Xu Zhang to come after him again just because he wrote a song for me privately.

I go to pick up Salinger the following morning to record the interview. Just as I open the door, I hear Ms. Zhang's voice.

"You changed your ringtone?"

I hurriedly pull back my hand from pushing the door, nervous, when I hear Salinger comes down the stairs with a "hmmm".

"The singing voice sounds like Nan."

"It *is* Nan," Salinger says.

Behind the door I am taking deep breaths, hands on my chest. Is this what they mean by "the corners of my mouth are reaching for the sky" and "ecstatic joy washes over me"?

Ms. Zhang's voice sounds even more surprised. "Huh? He even recorded a song specifically for you as your phone ringtone?"

She knows I studied music, but didn't know I also sing; she is probably thinking that only professional singers' songs are available for download as phone ringtones. That is why she is asking. But it still sounds a bit embarrassing to hear it out loud like that.

Salinger's voice pauses for a moment. "In a sense."

"*Hai-ya*, you musicians know your games!" Ms. Zhang says. "I was going to ask what song it is, but turns out he is singing it specifically for you. Although I have to say..."

"What?"

"If he calls you, would it sound like he's singing a song to you before talking to you? That way you'd forgive him even if it is bad news, right? Haha, I didn't think the boy was quite so crafty."

Salinger chuckles.

I gently close the door and go to the stairwell alone. I've heard everything, including everything I should and shouldn't have heard. Salinger's last chuckle was light as a feather. I don't even know if he had really laughed, or if it was just my imagination.

Opening the music website, there are already a lot of comments under the song. I keep scrolling, but I can't read any of them, I just keep imagining how Salinger felt when he heard the song. Did he like it? How would he rate it in his mind? Would he be surprised by the arrangement of the bridge? Would he have smiled when he saw "Bahamut"?

At what point did he decide that he wanted to use it as a ringtone?

The more I try to calm down, the less calm I become. I look up at the ceiling and can't suppress the teenage boy giddiness at the thought that he'd downloaded the song and set it as a ringtone immediately; that he'd done it without saying a word! And how often did he have to visit my music page to have already downloaded it so soon after the release?

It is a pity there is no rooftop access. This would be the perfect time to rush up to it and yell at the boiling earth beneath my feet. I skip that, so all I can do is giggle. It is the kind of giggle that makes all your face muscles sore.

That's what you'd call a world-conquering giggle.

♪ ♩ ♫ ♬

In the afternoon, we go to CBC station to record the talk show *Be Good and Listen*. The show is new, but innovative. Unlike the usual model where the host and guests chat about life, the show has a whole panel of professionals from the same field as the guest who participate in the interview and chat sessions.

This time, LOTUS is accompanied by a panel of music industry professionals, including music producers, songwriters, and music website founders. Some of them

even qualify as LOTUS's seniors in the industry. The host is not modest in saying that today's panel is the most luxurious on their show.

After hearing the introduction, even Xiaoxiao says, "Oh my god, LOTUS is really something if they can bring these guys out!"

This proves that Xu Zhang has carefully selected all of LOTUS's engagements. At the beginning of the show, a VCR is played to draw out the guests. The VCR was spontaneously recorded by the LOTUS fan club, in which fans from all over the world showed their support for LOTUS—one of them even brought her husky with her. The dog is very sweet, sitting just to the side.

The fangirl said, "Salinger, shake hands."

The dog obediently put his paw in the girl's hand as the owner and dog faced the camera together.

"Go LOTUS, go Salinger!"

"Woof! Woof!"

Ji Shi laughs so hard that he has to lean on Salinger's back, all the while rubbing his back from top to bottom. "Such a wide puppy back—"

Surprisingly, several fans that appeared on the VCR are invited to the set—including the husky's owner, who is being questioned curiously by the male host after she is invited on stage.

"Why would you name your dog after your idol? I really don't understand you girls' logic!"

The fangirl says innocently, "It's because I love him that much."

"Salinger, go give her a handshake," the hostess on the side suddenly says in a honeyed tone.

The audience follows the lead, wooing and ahhing, demanding that he shake her hand.

Salinger gets up to shake the fangirl's hand, and the hostess says, "Salinger, don't put it down yet." She then asks the shy girl, "What does it feel like?"

The girl turns her head to the microphone and murmurs, "...It's not quite the same."

"Of course it's not the same! Imagine if it felt the same as your dog's paw!" the hostess says wittily, making the audience laugh.

"It's just...wide and warm..." the fangirl says as she glances up at Salinger, scraping the barrel for words. "His palm's lines are a bit deep, I think, and there are thick calluses on his fingers..."

Salinger just watches her. She seems to have run out of words when the hostess pats Salinger.

"That's enough. How long are you going to hold her hand for? The girl can't think of anything to say anymore!"

Salinger asks the girl, "No more?"

The fangirl nods with a blush. Only then does Salinger let go of her hand, slowly, politely, and gently.

After the fans have all left the stage, the male host asks Salinger, “Would you be mad if your name is used for a dog?”

Salinger says it’s fine, but Alan immediately jumps in with, “Just not a poodle!”

The vocalist explodes into demonic laughter. While everyone else is laughing, Salinger just sits there quietly rubbing his fingers together.

After that lighthearted opening, it is time to get down to the conversation. You can tell that Stone and the panel are having a great time. Everyone is talking freely, except for Salinger, who is looking at his teammates as they speak, literally just looking, sometimes at their hair, sometimes at their hands...

The hostess can’t stand it anymore. She calls him out. “That gentleman over there, say something! Even though it’s nice for you to just sit there and quietly give off your masculine hormones, we still would love to hear you speak!”

Salinger says calmly, “I don’t have a mic.”

The hostess immediately says, “Give it to him, give it to him, give it to him!”

Stone and Li Xiang point their mics at Salinger’s mouth with ease. The hostess stands up as well. She walks over and shoves the mics toward his mouth. “Enough?”

The audience bursts into laughter as Salinger looks up from the three mics and asks the hostess, “What are you guys talking about again?”

Judging by the look in his eyes, he really doesn’t know. The hostess crosses her arms, bummed out by his look.

“Ah, I want to hit him so bad, but you guys won’t let me do it. Salinger, are you even listening to our conversation or not?”

Salinger asks Li Xiang next to him, “What is it about?”

“Don’t tell him!”

The leader shrugs helplessly, albeit with compassion. Salinger looks to the fans below, hoping to be tipped off, but the hostess is quicker than he is and points at the fans.

“If you tell him, he’ll just wander again later and ignore you completely, understand?”

The fans have to shut up and one fangirl shouts, “Sorry, Salinger!”

Salinger is one man poked at by three mics. He looks cluelessly around. When he looks at me, I hastily and quietly point to the big screen behind him. Salinger, who is sitting on the couch, then takes one of the mics and turns to look at the big screen behind him.

“So that’s what we’re talking about.”

The hostess shouts, “Who? Who sold us out?!”

Alan says, “Who else could it be? There’s just—”

Salinger slaps Alan's shoulder from behind, his arm going around Li Xiang. A shock goes through Alan. He looks at Salinger, then at the hostess, as if in surrender.

"I can't. I'm really scared of him..."

Apart from this interlude, the conversation is fairly interesting. However, the topic of conversation somehow turns to the current state of the music industry, and Mr. Qu Xiangbo, one of the panelists, can't help but criticize talent shows.

"The music industry is no longer the same as our time. People don't want to climb the ladder step by step. So many talent shows are out there. Everyone wants to be an overnight success. I sometimes see the same faces on several talent shows. It's baffling. I'm going to overgeneralize just this once today—not a single person who enters one of those things isn't fickle-minded. They're bound to never make real music."

Mr. Qu Xiangbo is a renowned musician known for his work and his outspokenness. He dares to say this to the CBC, which relies on its talent shows for ratings, and none of the hosts have the courage to refute it to his face.

Only the hostess politely says, "Come on sir. Spare us some dignity. There's a talent show being recorded just next door!"

"What dignity? You'll cut it out of the show anyway. Is there anyone sitting here from a talent show? Is LOTUS from a talent show?"

The leader and Ji Shi and the others are shaking their heads. Stone's headshake is a bit more subtle, but he wears a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Do people with real ability and talent need to kiss ass and go to a talent show? Surely their music can speak for themselves."

The only person here who has done a talent show is me, I guess. Although I know that Mr. Qu Xiangbo is not referring to anyone in particular, nor could he, there is still a kind of intangible embarrassment. Because he represents authority, his words come with a truth filter that make people reflect on themselves. I do want to go on a bigger stage, to be heard by more people. Does that mean I am really that fickle-minded? I remember Dong Jia again. The talent show is indeed full of shady things that people can't do anything about, so why do you still go for it when you know that already? Things that I never doubted seem to be shaken by this man's powerful criticism.

That feeling sucks. It is the kind of frustration where you want to argue back, but you know you are not qualified at all, so you don't have ground to stand on.

Everyone on the panel agrees and nods.

"Mr. Qu, let's shake hands. No matter how others see it, I despise the talent show with all my heart. None of the successful ones rely on their real ability. Those who fail have no real ability at all. Even if they have some talent, after participating in that show, their hearts would have changed. They would not have the patience to make good music again, and start relying on these shortcuts. That is the real tragedy. The talent shows are just a vanity fair, and the further you get away from them, the better it is for your music.

“Those who come out of talent shows can only be called celebrities, not musicians. There’s a real difference between that.”

Salinger, who has kept quiet the whole time, sighs. “I can’t listen to this anymore.”

Before Stone can react, the mic in his hand is grabbed by Salinger.

“A talent show is a competition. Some people make the competition into what it is now, but those who participate in the competition are not guilty of anything. What do you mean by saying their hearts change after participating in a talent show? You are a musician, too. How little faith do you have in your own passion?”

I am not the only one surprised. Even the host and Stone are shocked that he dares to argue against Qu Xiangbo in such a blunt manner.

Qu Xiangbo is not offended. He just smiles and shakes his head. “The fact that you think so shows that you are still naïve. Musicians are also mortals; what do I mean by mortals? Mortals are easily influenced by the people and circumstances around them. Musicians are not as determined as you think. Their hearts are not made of gold or stone. The only way they are able to endure loneliness is because they know the weaknesses of human nature, so they avoid those bad influences.”

He knocks on the table as he says, “If you insist on jumping into the dirty muck, can you keep yourself clean of the mud? Let’s talk about you guys. What you’d hoped to achieve when you first formed a rock band, it’s not quite the same now, is it? The people who go to talent shows are people who, to put it bluntly, just can’t stand the loneliness, or seeing other people become popular. After the talent show, who do you expect would stick to just making good music? I’m telling you, there’s no one.”

With that, he puts down the microphone and crosses his arms. “No argument accepted.”

It is a gesture of authority. That’s him refusing to let you speak again. I also see Stone send a hinting glance toward Salinger, telling him to stop talking.

Salinger leans forward, disregarding Stone’s look. “Okay, I won’t argue with that. I’ll only say the following to people who don’t make it in talent shows, but are still persisting in making music, who are enduring their loneliness better than anyone else—as long as you are talented enough, passionate enough, persistent enough, you have every right to make the talent show your stage. You deserve to be heard by more people. You deserve to be an overnight success. There is nothing wrong with your decision to enter the talent show. It is because of you that the talent show has what little value it has.

“Some people hide in their comfort zone, not seeing the ruthlessness and cruelty of the vanity fair. They are not qualified to talk about so-called persistence. You are only qualified if you have seen it. After experiencing it, you will understand better what you are holding on to because you have caught the virus and survived. Now you have antibodies, and you are a much more valuable person. No one doubt yourself because of a few words from someone who doesn’t really know you. I don’t want to see that.”

It is rare for Salinger to say so much. The whole audience listens while holding their breath. He doesn’t look at Qu Xiangbo when he says these words; he looks at

the stage, at the camera, then as if he is looking at me across the lens. I know that these words, at least a large part of them, are for me.

No one doubt yourself because of a few words from someone who doesn't really know you. I don't want to see that.

But I am not as good as you say I am, Salinger. I am not yet worthy of what you say today. I will still be influenced by the words of others and will still need my idol to save me like a savior. But I will try to make my future self deserving of what you say.

Applause follows in the studio. Surprisingly, it is from Qu Xiangbo.

"Do all of you rock stars have such a nasty temper? Although I don't think the kind of person you're talking about exists, I wish they did."

Hai squeezes my arm, his eyes glowing. "He's defending you! Isn't it exciting? Surprising? If it were me, I'd run up and jump on him!"

I look at Salinger. I can't help but nod, but not to the idea of jumping on him. I want to hug him! How in the world could there be such a man? From head to toe, he is everything I aspire to be!

Xiaoxiao falls on Hai, laughing. "I can't. That's so cool... I wish my boss would defend me when he talks about foodies on future shows..."

Dance the Night Away is also recording here that day, right next door to us. They finish earlier than we do, so some of the contestants come to see the LOTUS interview. That is when I see a familiar face by the door.

Dong Jia sees me and smiles as if she has seen an old friend. She is still wearing the same make-up she wore on the competition, with glitter on her eyes. The tiredness from that day is no longer noticeable underneath.

I ask her how she is doing, and she tells me that she won't be coming back after today. I'd guessed that, too. It is like seeing myself eliminated that day. Remembering what had happened that day in the underground garage, what she experienced is probably way worse than I'd felt.

"It's fine," she says to herself before I can think of anything to comfort her. "Maybe I just don't dance well enough."

"You're a great dancer, and I'm certainly not the only one who thinks so." I say. "It doesn't seem to matter what I think, though..."

"No, I'm glad you said that." Immediately, a corner of her eye makeup smudges. "I'm just sad. Why does it always end up like this? I've been competing for so long. I don't know why—the stage looks so shiny, but behind the scenes it's a completely different story. No one likes me; no one even gives me a hug after the competition..."

At this point there is nothing I can do for her except just hug her. Although it is just a courtesy hug, it also makes me realize that the dance that's so powerful and explosive onstage actually comes from such a thin and frail body.

When she lets go, Dong Jia smiles through her tears and says, "Thank you, I do feel much better..."

Maybe she's been through a lot, maybe she's been in the city longer than I have, and this is the furthest and hardest she has ever gone. Maybe that's why she's crying like this—like she's about to give up, but at least still has a chance to achieve her dream. It's just a setback, not a failure. Even if it is a failure, it's not like she can't start all over again.

"I really liked the Black Swan dance you did. I even voted for you the other day." I say, "I've never wanted to vote for any contestant before. You're the first. Don't give up."

Don't give up just like that.

I am not Dong Jia's idol, nor do I know how to dance. The support my words can give her may only be a billionth of what Salinger had given me back then, but it would be a shame not to tell her if there is the slightest possibility that I can help her find the courage to believe in herself.

"Thank you." You can tell she means a lot by that. As she finishes, she looks in the stage's direction. "I heard that LOTUS is recording a show over here, so I wanted to come and thank him again in person."

When I dropped her off that day, even though she thanked me profusely, the person she really should have thanked was sitting in the car and didn't receive it directly.

"Wait a bit longer, then. They're almost done."

He is spacing out on the stage again. The hostess calls him twice before he hears her. He comes out of his daze.

"What do you want me to say this time?"

Catching the man spacing out is sure an excellent way to get a good laugh from the audience. The hostess sighs. "My God, Salinger, why are you always so lost in your own head?"

Forty minutes later, the show finally wraps up. I take Dong Jia to the break room and tell her to wait outside. Everyone else in the room is chatting, and Salinger is alone on the couch on his phone.

"Lin Sai-*ge*, do you have a minute now?"

He doesn't look up, just looks down and asks me what I need. I say someone wants to come and say thank you.

Stone looks toward me, as if a little wary, asking, "Who is it?"

I am a bit baffled when Salinger stands up and says, "Let's go."

Dong Jia looks extremely embarrassed when she sees Salinger come out. "Am I disturbing you? I just wanted to come and say thank you. I am really grateful for last time."

Salinger says, "Not at all. Is that the make-up for your dance?"

Dong Jia nods. "I was afraid you would leave early, so I didn't have a chance to take it off."

"It's beautiful."

Dong Jia blushes a little. “I got a little excited just now and smudged it with my tears...”

“It’s still beautiful.”

He really shouldn’t have said that, but apparently Salinger isn’t self-aware enough to know the effect he has on girls when he says such things. Even if he says it with an expressionless face and no special intentions, people just assume he means something else.

When the band comes out, Stone gives Salinger and Dong Jia a strange look, followed by an accusing glance at me. Dong Jia hastily bows and hurries away.

Stone asks Salinger, “Who was that?”

Salinger says, “A fan.”

“Would a fan come to see you in that kind of makeup? A fan your assistant asks you to see alone?”

When Stone’s gaze sweeps over me, I feel as if a titanic mountain is crushing me.

“Stone,” Salinger says. “She’s already gone.”

In the nanny van, Salinger looks sleepy; he falls asleep as soon as he gets in. Even when we arrive at his place and I call out to him, he doesn’t respond, so I have to tap him.

“Lin Sai-*ge*?”

His head is still leaning against the window. He cracks open his eyes and turns to look at me. Probably because he is tired, his eyes are a bit red.

I say, “It’s time to get off.”

He gets up without saying a word and ducks to get out of the car. I join him as the nanny van drives straight back to the company.

Salinger turns around to ask me, “How are you going to get back?”

I tell him I’ll take the Metro, but when I look at the time, the last train is about to leave.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, I need to go now!”

As I rush down the escalator, I hear the announcement of the last subway. I tap my card and go through the gates, but I am still a step too late. The metro roars away, and I am left alone in the station. I have to slowly turn around and go up the stairs again. As I am leaving the station, it suddenly occurs to me that I usually feel unsteady on my feet just going down the stairs, but I was running so fast just now, and I didn’t even fall. Hah!

“What are you laughing at?”

A shiver goes through my body at the sound of Salinger’s voice. I look up and there he is, standing at the entrance to the underground station, the big lapels of his fur collar jacket flipped up, posing his question to me from above.

I am a little surprised he hasn’t gone back yet, so I quickly walk up the escalator.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, you haven’t left yet?”

He hands me a set of car keys. “Take my car.”

I am so touched. “There’s no need...”

“You’re going to pick me up tomorrow anyway.”

He gives me a look that means “end of discussion,” so I have to go with him to the underground garage. I feel a little curious in retrospect.

“Lin Sai-*ge*, how did you know I wouldn’t make it to the last metro?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why did you stand there waiting for me?”

“Just taking a chance.”

I murmur to myself, *“You always seem to win your bets.”*

He walks ahead, and doesn’t turn around when he says, “Not every time.”

TBC…

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[1] Jie literally means elder sister. It is often used to refer to a woman/girl older than the speaker who has no relation to the speaker.

[2] Literally means “One Calls and Ten Thousand Respond”, a variant of a common idiom “Yi Hu Bai Ying (One calls and a hundred respond)”, meaning one is highly influential.

[3] Similar to jie, ge means elder brother, often used to refer to a man/boy older than the speaker.

[4] A play on the name Li Xiang, which sounds identical to the word for “ideal, dream, expectation.”

[5] Shi Tou is the Chinese word for Stone. The character is referred to as “Shi Tou” in the original text.

[6] Cognate with the Japanese phrase “senpai,” meaning “senior” to show respect.

[7] Similar to the Japanese Senpai-Kohai (senior-junior) relationship. For two people to have a qianbei-houbei relationship, they have to at least be in the same trade.

[8] An honorific, which literally means “teacher.”

[9] □□ , literally “heart” and “sunny.” The two characters combined is pronounced the same as the word for “mood.”

[10] □□□ , a large hotpot chain known for its quirky and overzealous customer service.

[11] □□ , literally an academic sister, similar to a martial sister. The courtesy title is used to refer to a female schoolmate in a higher grade.

[12] □ , generally used to mean a person is showing off in a flirtatious, playful manner. Often used with sexual connotations. It also means “slutty.”

[13] 오빠 , the Korean word for “older brother” that girls use to address older boys/men. Here, Stone is using it the mock Salinger the “idol.”

[14] This is a direct quote of a commonly used animal welfare slogan.

[15] Xiaoxiao: the word □ (xiao) means smiling in Chinese.

[16] Erhu (□□□ : a Chinese two-stringed bowed instrument.

[17] Guzheng (□ □) : a Chinese plucked zither, usually made of wood for structural and decorative reasons.

[18] A Japanese onomatopoeia for the sound of a heart beating fast.

[19] Japanese for “I love you.”

[20] Didi (□□) means younger brother in Chinese. It’s sometimes used as a term of endearment to show affection.

[21] “Chicken Soup” is internet slang that refers to generic inspirational quotes. It comes from the book series *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

[22] Refers to two figures in Chinese history. Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi were best friends who understood each other deeply; Ziqi was said to be the only person who understood Boya's music. Boya vowed to never play the qin again after Zhong Ziqi's death.

[23] Academic or martial elder brother, used to refer to someone senior to the speaker who studied under the same teacher or master.